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The Editor Roams the Streets

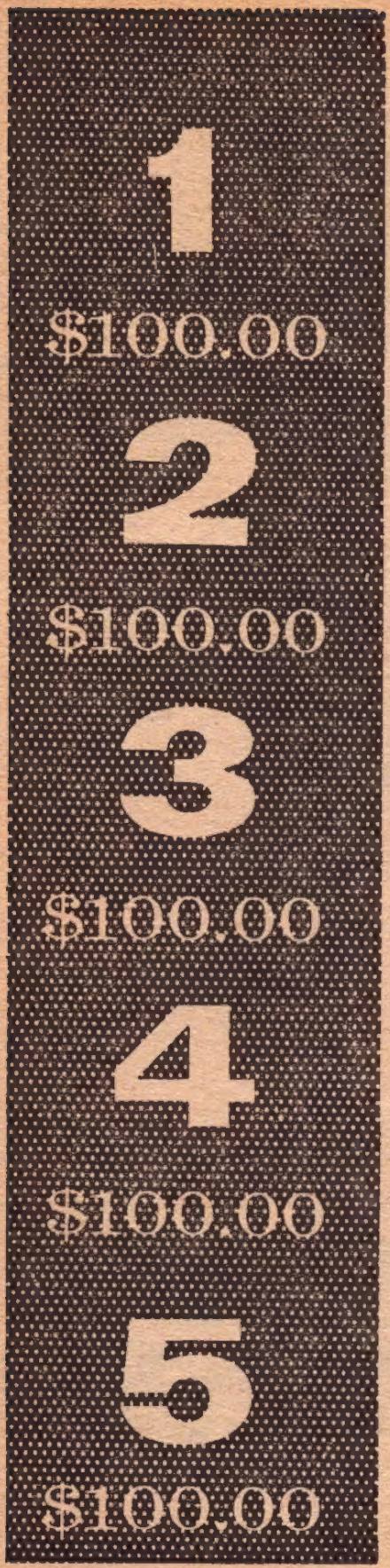
New York is a big town—a fantastic town. You walk up one street and down another and you never cease to marvel because New York has something no other city in the world has. But you can't put your finger on it. Perhaps the answer is *wealth*. New York has every conceivable thing within its limits that can be bought and paid for. This and the fact that it is the biggest city in the United States—the richest country in the world.

London, Paris, Rome, and the other big cities beyond this nation's borders each have an individuality of their own, but in comparison to New York, they are poor cities and what they have reflects this comparative poverty.

Perhaps that's what it is that makes the difference.

In New York, anything the mind of man can conceive can be had. A new building goes up. Cost is not a factor and it is the wedding of genius and money and is the most amazing building the world has ever seen. And not just native genius because money is a magnet and all the genius of the world looks toward New York where the reward is the greatest.

Thus, New York has the most glittering buildings, the most alert people, the most unbelievable variety of restaurants, the most glittering jungle of automobiles, the most vast and frantic conglomeration of charities. The biggest, most incredible everything. *(Concluded on page 130)*



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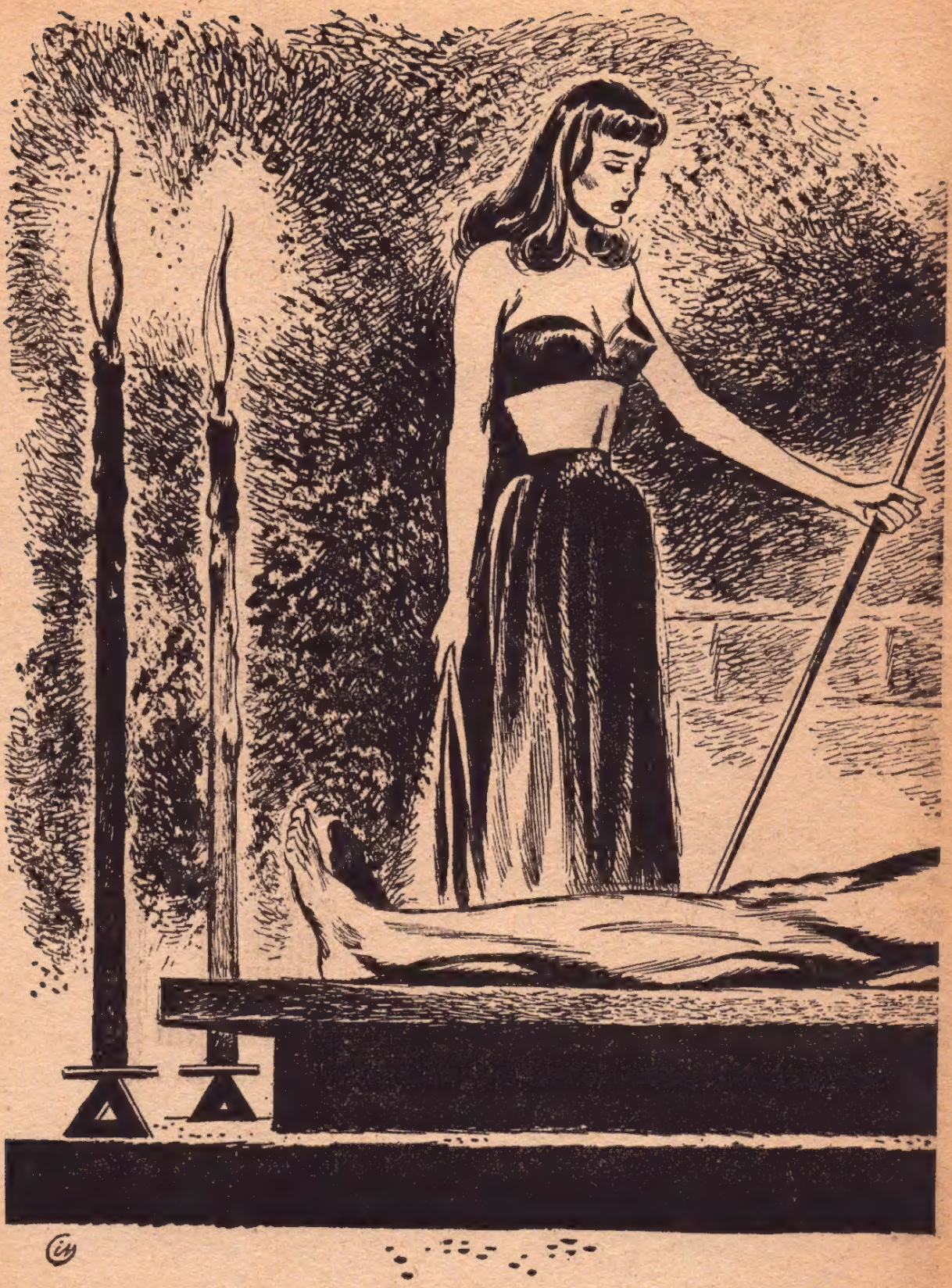
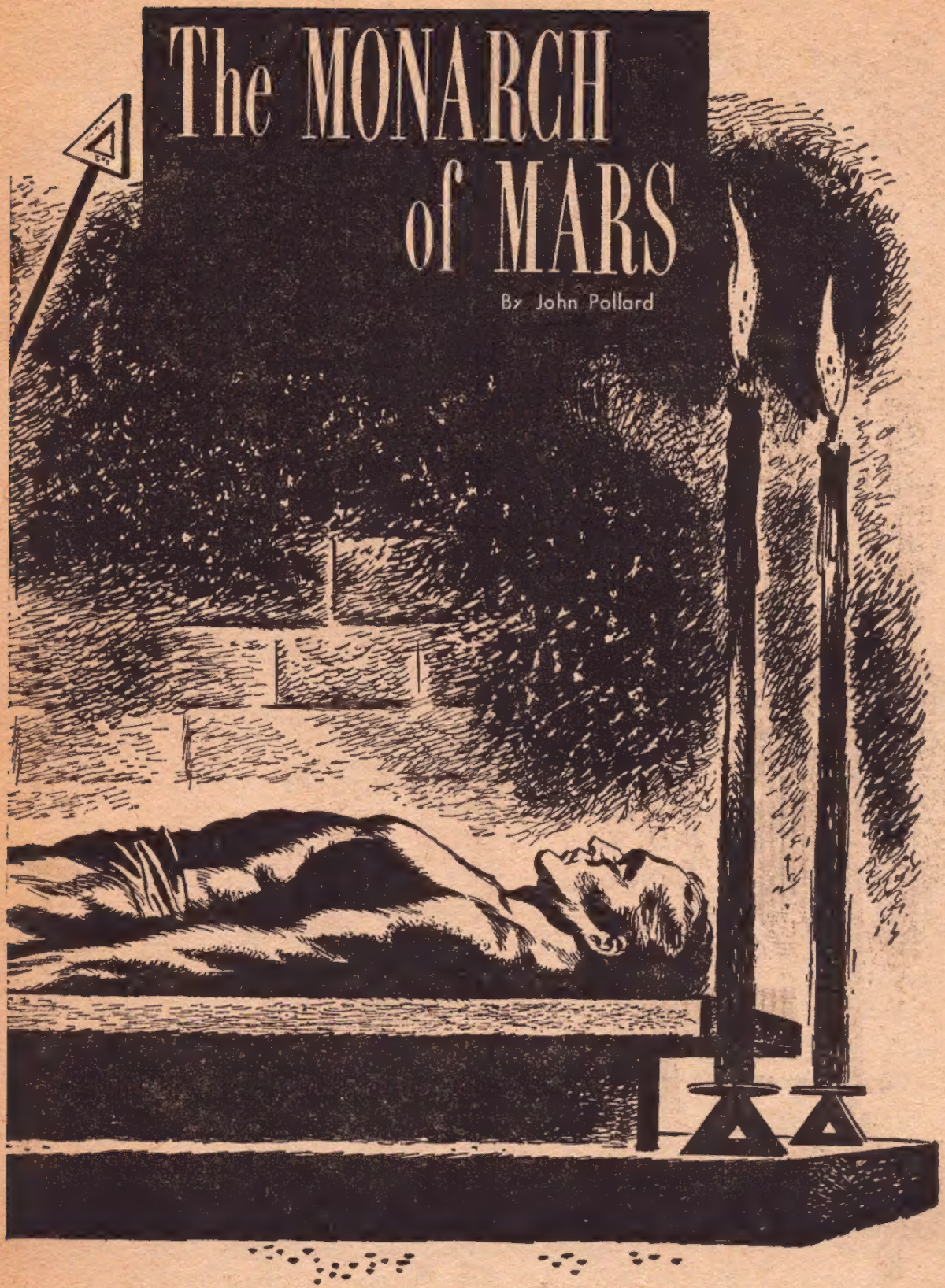


"Nobly you served and

The MONARCH of MARS

By John Pollard



now the price is paid."

THE MONARCH OF MARS

By JOHN POLLARD

In future times the old laws of morality will still hold. But they will broaden and Christ's words may well read: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he shall lay down his life for his planet."

"MR. JEROME Mitchell?" asked the voice on the phone.

"Speaking."

The voice was masculine, businesslike. "If I have my facts correct, you returned recently from an Alaskan assignment. Nome, where you worked on a nuclear fusion project."

"That's correct." Jerry was a little surprised that his activities had been of interest to anyone. But not alarmed. There had been nothing in the least secret about the Alaskan project.

"My name is Alfred Kennedy. I called to inquire whether or not you would be interested in discussing another assignment."

Jerry did not know quite what to say. He expected to accept further employment, of course, but he'd been slaving up north for over eight months and had planned a vacation; a little time to catch up on his sleep and perhaps romance a blonde or two.

"What's the nature of the project?"

"Quite similar to the one you just finished."

"The location?"

"South America."

Jerry pondered. The *Physicist's Journal* listed three pending operations in South America but they were all being master-minded by Nuclionics International and that outfit didn't call a minor physicist at night to ask him if he wanted a job. You went to their office with your hat and your credentials in your hand.

Mr. Kennedy, at the other end of the line, seemed to divine Jerry's trend of thought. He spoke easily. "This is a small, private project. Hasn't been listed or publicized. Excellent money behind it though. How does twenty - thousand for six months sound to you? Plus all expenses."

It sounded fine; far better than a junior physicist had a right to expect.

"The money would be entirely satisfactory, but—"

"Suppose you drop into my office tomorrow and we'll discuss it further. The Borman Building. My name is on the directory."

"I'd be glad to."

"Shall we say two o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

Jerry put down the phone. He lit a cigarette and stretched out on the bed. He stared at the ceiling and pondered the thing and after a while he stopped regarding it with surprise and wonder. What the hell? What was so exceptional about somebody calling him up and offering him a job? The big outfits didn't control all the work. He blew out a cloud of smoke and allowed himself a moment of self-congratulation. Somebody knew about him; had liked his work. Word like that gets around.

He snubbed the cigarette, closed his eyes and wished he could call somebody up and tell them about it. Someone who would be interested and glad for him and pat him on the back a little.

A friend.

But he had no friends in New York. And very few anywhere else. You drifted away from the fellows you knew at college. And when an assignment was over the friends you made there hiked off in all directions; back to their families, their homes, their real friends. *Now we want you to drop in on us, Jerry. I've written Meg all about you. Don't phone, just come.* But you never took advantage of them because the project was finished. And the friendships finished with it.

Jerry had been an only child and his father and mother were dead. He'd had plenty of opportunity to form close associations but he'd always been too busy—too deep in his work. It was just lately that he had begun to regret his laziness in the direction of social contacts.

He yawned. Soon he would dress and go to dinner. Then to the bar. He would size up the field, select an unattached female and kill the evening. Or perhaps he would kill it over the bar with some other lone male. It seemed there were quite a few men in his line who had not had time for lasting friendships.

"Miss Jennifer Andrews?"

"Speaking."

It was an attractive male voice, the tone warm; but

businesslike. "Jennifer Andrews the metallurgist, who has just returned from the reclamation expedition in the Sudan?"

"Why — yes." Jennifer wished he would get on with it. She was stark naked, having been in the midst of her shower when the phone rang. She'd wrapped a towel around herself before coming to the phone, but had dropped it halfway across the room and was now trying to reach it by stretching out one long tanned leg. "Just a moment." She retrieved the towel, "Yes?"

My name is Alfred Kennedy. I called to ask if you would be interested in discussing another assignment."

Jennifer stood with the towel in one hand and the phone in the other, quite at a loss for words. Naturally she was interested in new employment but she had planned to catch up on a few things first; things like new clothes—a stunning gown or two, though goodness knew where she'd get a chance to wear them; a few trips to the beauty parlor; and perhaps some mildly predatory visits to the better night clubs. She wanted the assurance of being told she was beautiful over a candle-lit table to the accompaniment of soft music.

"What sort of an assignment?"

"Quite similar to the one you just finished."

"What would be the location?"

"South America."

Jennifer thought that strange. She'd heard of no South American projects. But then she'd only been back a few days.

"This is a small, private undertaking. We haven't bothered to list it. Would ten thousand for a six-month stay interest you?"

Jennifer blinked her beautiful dark eyes. "It certainly would, but—"

"Suppose you drop into my office tomorrow. We can discuss it further. The Borman Building. My name is on the directory. How about two o'clock?"

"I'm sure I can make it."

"Fine. I'll be expecting you. Goodbye."

Jennifer cradled the phone slowly, her eyes vague. She forgot the towel, walked to the bed and stretched out full length, staring at the ceiling. Her first instinct had been to mistrust this Mr. Kennedy. But why should she? Perhaps she had spent too much time being mistrustful — wary — careful. Maybe that was why she now lay alone in a New

York Hotel room with no friend to call—no one to care whether she was in town or not.

There had of course been contributing factors. Mom and Dad gone. No brothers or sisters. Only distant relatives.

And her career.

She had blamed so much on her career; so much loneliness it really wasn't responsible for. It had brought her in contact with many men who had been attracted to her. Jennifer looked down the length of her exquisite body and realized the contrary would have been incredible. But she had never let a man get too close. She had wanted several of them very close indeed but good sense always intervened. Good sense? Now she wondered.

Jennifer got up from the bed and toweled away the last drops of water. She would dress carefully, have dinner in the bar, reap satisfaction from the male eyes that would turn in her direction. Dread the coming day when they no longer turned . . .

John Hamilton Martell sat huddled at a skid-row table. He wanted nothing in this world except a drink. So far as he was concerned he needed nothing in this world but a drink; a long, endless flow that would run down his parched throat until the moment of his final taking off.

He looked blearily about him at the dull-witted morons among whom he now spent his days and nights while he thought of who he was. Martell the electronic wizard; of all the things he had learned; all the stupendous, awesome scientific knowledge he had accumulated. And what was it worth? What did it add up to? A shot of rotgut in a saloon a year or so from the end of the trail. That was all. He sobbed soundlessly and wondered if the barkeep would hold still for just one more; just one more libation of poison to gentle down his screaming nerves and let him sink into unconsciousness.

"Are you John Hamilton Martell?"

He pushed the dirty white hair from in front of his eyes and saw a man in a gray suit wearing a gray hat and a gray necktie. He had a pleasant tanned face and his gray eyes were both friendly and distant at the same time. "I have the dubious honor of bearing that name, sir," Martell said.

"My name is Alfred Kennedy. I would like the privilege of buying you a drink."

Martell squeezed his eye lids tight together. He counted

four, opened them. The man was still there. "That is a privilege any man can gain for the asking, sir. I'll have a shot of Old Forest Fire with a chaser of—"

"Not here, if you please. I'd be honored if you would accompany me to another place I have in mind."

"The honor is mine," Martell said as he struggled to his feet. I will follow where you lead."

There was a cab at the curb. The cushions were soft, the air fresh, a lethal combination so far as John Hamilton Martell was concerned. He slept.

He was vaguely aware of being lifted and carried, heard doors open and close, felt softness under him. Then silence. After a while he opened his eyes. He was in a bedroom. Clean, quiet, with a remote disinterested air about it. The light was burning. It revealed a bottle on the bed table. Martell sat up. There was a note beside the bottle. He picked up the note and read:

> This is excellent whisky. After what you have been drinking it will make you healthily sick. If you drink it quickly, you will be in shape to report to my office in the Borman Building at one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. So get started. I will expect you.
>
> Alfred Kennedy.

Martell laid the note down. He picked up the bottle. And sat staring at it for a long time.

Frank Baylor looked around the cell with his one good eye. He opened his mouth and applied the pressure of a finger to a right upper molar. It was loose but he thought it would stay where it belonged. He looked at his face in the steel mirror bolted over the wash stand. It was a mess. He turned back to the bunk. Not a bad cell though. Better than he usually drew.

He tried to grin and made a bad job of it. Then he put his face in his hands and wondered how crying felt. But it was too late for tears. They wouldn't wash away anything —bring anything back. The lost goddam years, the respect of his profession.

Brilliant, they said of him back at M. I. T. A special mention at graduating exercises of Franklin R. Baylor. Brilliant, but erratic.

Erratic. Sure. A polite way of saying this goddam stupid bum is going to ruin a dazzling career because he can't hold his goddam temper. Sign

of an inferiority complex—a temper. This guy's always with his fists cocked waiting for some wise guy to say something. Hoping for it, maybe. Then, wham! Right in the kisser and the cops digging in among the broken chairs to haul him off to pokey again.

They quit hiring him. Less brilliant mechanical engineers got the jobs done without any busted heads. And Frank Baylor had about run out his string. Down so far nobody even bothered to sue him for damages anymore. He didn't have a pot to pick pennies out of. The end of his string.

Frank wiped a hand across his eyes. What was it that smart boy had said in the tavern? He couldn't remember now, but he's swung from the ankles as usual and here he was. As usual. He wanted to cry. He wanted to double his fists and beat somebody's head in. He wanted to—

"On ya feet, Marciano."

Frank looked up. The turnkey was doing just that—turning the key. The door opened. Frank got up. "Throwing me in the bullpen?"

"Ya been bailed."

"You're crazy."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nobody'd buy me out."

"Some jerk did. Come on."

The man waiting outside said, "My name is Alfred Kennedy. "I've gone your bail."

"Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you would rather remain in jail."

Frank was usually contrite after he cooled down—after it was too late. "No."

"Then accept the gift horse for the time being."

"And later?"

"I'd like to see you in my office in the Borman Building at noon tomorrow."

"And if I don't show up?"

"Then there is no point in my bailing you out."

Frank's sagging shoulders sagged a trifle more. "I'll be there."

"Fine. I accept your word. Have you any money?"

"No."

"Here is twenty dollars. Get cleaned up. Get a good night's sleep. You'll feel better tomorrow." Alfred Kennedy turned and left the station.

"Who is that guy?" Frank asked.

No one knew.

The orchestra was playing *Star Dust* when Jerry Mitchell looked up and saw the tall, raven-haired brunette seated

at the far end of the bar. A chill went through him. The delicious chill of iced champagne. Never in his life had he seen such a beautiful woman. And not just beauty either. Something more. She wore black. It was her color, blending with the electricity she hurled down the bar full into his face.

Jerry called the barkeep. "The lady at the end. Ask her if I can buy her a drink."

The barkeep carried the request. The lady smiled and nodded and Jerry left his stool. It was nine o'clock. Hour followed hour.

It was five in the morning before he slept . . .

He awoke at one-thirty the next afternoon. The girl flashed first into his thoughts. He spent several blissful minutes in recollection before he remembered the matter of a twenty-thousand-dollar job offer. He rocketed out of bed, shaved in seconds, and dressed, adjusting his tie as the cab snaked through midtown traffic. He entered the Borman Building and found Alfred Kennedy's door on the ninth floor. It had a plain, unpretentious frosted glass panel. All it said was Alfred R. Kennedy. He could have been a billionaire empire builder or a two-dollar horse player. Jerry went inside.

He stopped dead as he closed the door.

"You!"

They spoke simultaneously —Jerry and the gorgeous dark girl. Their eyes shared a look of wonder as he moved forward and sat down beside her on the plain oak bench.

"What are you doing here?" Again it was simultaneous.

After a while, Jerry said, "You lied to me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Your name isn't Margaret Davis at all. And you aren't in town for just a couple of days, are you?"

"No."

"And you're not a swimming instructress in the Peoria YWCA."

"No."

"I can tell you more. You never expected to see me again. If I'd called this morning they'd have told me you checked out."

"I did check out." A blush had spread over her lovely throat and Jerry wondered whether it was caused by the revelations of the moment or memories of the previous night. He felt secure in his righteous resentment at her duplicity. Then her eyes flashed.

"And what about you, Mr.

William Smith? What about the ten carloads of bottle caps you're buying for a California client? Have you shoveled them all aboard yet?"

His righteousness vanished. "I—I lied too," he said.

She lowered her eyes, her blush returning. "I'm so ashamed."

"I'm not."

"You—you wouldn't be."

"Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not an habitual cad. In fact last night was the first time—"

"And I'm not promiscuous — really — I'm —" Her eyes pleaded.

"I think we should do two things—right now."

"What do you suggest?"

"First—agree that last night is gone and forgotten. We will never mention it again—not under any circumstances"

"Are you sure you can forget it?" she asked doubtfully.

He smiled and lied with conviction. "Of course. And you?"

She was a good liar also.

"And now," Jerry said, "I think we'd better get our names straight."

They had just finished doing this when an inner door opened and a man in a gray suit smiled affably, spoke briskly. "I am Alfred Kennedy. Won't you come in?"

Alfred Kennedy had an estate on Long Island. Not the largest and most pretentious in the area; but neither the smallest nor the shabbiest. The interview in his office had resulted in only one really definite piece of business: an invitation to Long Island for the weekend. And now, Jennifer and Jerry sat contemplating the Atlantic from Kennedy's summer house.

Jerry was puzzled. "You know—I can't figure this deal at all."

Jennifer looked at his curly black hair and spoke dreamily. "Neither can I." She almost added, *darling,* but caught herself in time. After all, they'd pledged themselves to forget what had happened the night before. Silly pledge! Alfred Kennedy is certainly a strange man," she said.

"And a fine diffusionist."

"I don't understand."

"We went to talk to him about a job. But did we find out anything about it? Where it is? The nature of the project? Any actual facts at all?"

"Well—no. But that's the reason for this weekend. He's going to tell us all about it."

Jerry shrugged. "We've no complaint I guess, but why should he be so friendly? It's

hardly common practice in the field to get so palsy with—"

"I think you're just looking for trouble. Let's not go hunting bridges. The sunset is too beautiful."

Jerry turned quickly. Their eyes met. The electricity crackled again. "Not as beautiful as you," he said softly.

Jennifer lowered her eyes and all previous promises and resolutions would have been forgotten. But Jennifer raised her head. Her eyes widened, as she gazed across the lawn. "Good heavens! Do you see what—?"

"John Martell!" The exclamation was Jerry's but they shared the amazement.

"I thought he was dead."

"That's one of the rumors that got around after his nervous breakdown. I never believed it. I heard he lost his mind."

John Martell. One of the greatest scientific brains of the age. Jerry watched, spellbound, as the gaunt, harassed figure approached. Once, in his junior year at college, Jerry had met and shaken hands with Martell. A rare honor. Martell, who was adjudged in the same echelon as Einstein, Firmi, Newton. An immortal. He had carried Einstein's monumental theories on into the realm of cosmic fusion and diffusion; had been responsible for vast scientific progress.

And now he came swiftly across the lawn, the pale shadow of a once awesome figure.

Jerry and Jennifer arose and stood silent. Martell smiled wearily. "I'll sit down if you don't mind."

They made a quick place for him, tried to find words befitting the occasion. Failed.

The great man smiled. "You'll excuse my fatigue. A touch of virus has been plaguing me." He sized up this new pair and seemed to brighten at what he saw in Jennifer. "I imagine," he said, "that introductions are in order.

The introductions were made and Martell clearly remembered the handshake at M.I.T. during Jerry's junior year. Or at least he said he did.

He went on, "I am elated in finding myself in company with my own kind. Have we been brought together by pure chance?"

"I've been wondering about that, sir," Jerry said. "Jennifer and I are here in connection with Mr. Kennedy's South American project."

"Ah, yes. The South Ameri-

can project. Most intriguing."

"Do you have an interest in it, sir?"

"I wish you would drop the *sir*. It's so very clumsy. Yes, Mr. Kennedy contacted me. His plea was so urgent that I dropped vital work I was engaged in to come here and discuss it with him."

"It would be a great honor to work under you, Professor Martell," Jennifer said.

Martell regarded her shining eyes and felt a nameless terror. His dark wasted years marching by. Accusing him. "Thank you, my dear."

"Then we can assume you *are* going to work on the project?" Jerry asked.

Martell sat bemused. "The project? Oh, yes. I'm looking forward to—"

A sudden disturbance beyond some bushes to the right cut off his words. A rageful roaring just out of sight. Language no lady should have heard. A high-pitched squall of fright. Obvious violence. Jerry was on his feet and running.

He broke through the bushes with Jennifer close behind and almost fell over the core of the disturbance. A man in the livery of a butler lay on his back, bloody and terror-stricken. Sitting astride him was a muscular young man with big fists. The fists were beating a rugged tattoo on the person of the butler. The latter was protecting himself as best he could.

Jerry stepped forward and took the top man by the shoulders and hurled him away. The latter whimpered gratefully and crawled out of range.

The aggressor came catlike to his feet and got set to charge the new menace. He stopped, almost comically, with one foot in the air. "Jerry Mitchell!"

"Frank Baylor!"

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Jerry made no effort toward cordiality. Frank Baylor. The guy with the chip, they'd called him at college. A genius with a destroying temper. That about covered it. A tragic figure who prowled through life with doubled fists; who had beaten himself into discard through a weakness he could not or would not overcome. "I see you haven't changed a bit, Frank."

"Watch yourself, Mitchell. I'm not taking any guff from you!"

"What was your reason for this?"

The butler intervened in his own defense. "I merely suggested the gentleman stay

back from the bluff. The ground is soft and treacherous there. I certainly meant no—"

Frank turned on him viciously. "Sure, try and weasel out of it now! You and your goddam nose in the air. Nobody gives me orders, mister."

"I suggest you quiet down," Jerry said.

"You want a little trouble too, Mitchell?"

"No, but I'm not sidestepping it."

Violence could have burst forth again, but Frank Baylor's flash of rage had begun to burn out; to turn into regret and self-condemnation as it always did at this point. He dropped his fists and stared down at them bitterly. He opened them slowly into great hands, then turned suddenly and hurried away.

The butler had departed also. Jerry looked at Jennifer. "An old acquaintance?" she asked.

"Frank Baylor. He went to school with me. Half tiger, half man. That's about the only way you can classify him."

Jennifer's eyes were almost wistful. "The poor boy!"

"Did you say—the poor boy?"

"Yes. Didn't you see his face when he realized what he had done? He was suffering."

"The butler suffered too," Jerry snapped.

"What do you suppose Frank Baylor is doing here?"

Jerry raised his hands in a gesture of frustration. "I don't know. I'm beginning to wonder what you and I are doing here."

Dinner was a pleasantly casual affair with Alfred Kennedy the amalgam, fusing and glossing together what should have been a stiff situation. Frank Baylor's sullenless was softened somewhat by Jennifer's tactful overtures. John Martell sat like a ghost eyeing the whisky decanter on the sideboard. Jerry watched alertly for an opportunity to open the subject of the mysterious project, but Alfred Kennedy fenced him away from each opening as skillfully as a master swordsman toying with an amateur.

After coffee, Kennedy abruptly opened the subject himself. His opening was somewhat oblique but the barriers fell nonetheless.

He said, "I wonder if you four would oblige me by submitting to a physical examination?"

Jennifer gasped. Glances were exchanged. John Martell said, "I beg your pardon?"

Kennedy laughed easily. "I

think your surprise is generated by the time and the place. I know, this hardly seems the occasion. But if I had made the request in my office you wouldn't have thought it at all extraordinary."

"Then why didn't you make it in your office?" Jerry asked pointedly.

"There was no time. But so long as this was to be a weekend of both pleasure and business, I see no reason why the subject should not be broached."

Jerry had to go along with that. Hadn't he been trying to crack it from the first moment? "When do you wish us to take the physical."

"Immediately—now."

"Isn't that a little abrupt?"

"I have a reason. You see, any of you not able to pass it, could not accept the proposed assignment in any case. Therefore, isn't it good sense to discover now if I am causing any of you to waste time?"

Again, perfectly logical. Jerry glanced uncertainly at Jennifer and Kennedy read his thought. "Miss Andrews need have no fear of embarassment. The check, while vital, might be regarded as superficial. It will involve only the heart and lungs. Respiratory — circulatory — pulmonary—that sort of thing."

Jennifer spoke for the group. "Then let's get it over with," she said.

Kennedy beamed. "Fine. Then we can get on the other details. If you will follow me—"

He led them from the dining room and down the corridor into a small bare room housing nothing but a table and two chairs. Upon the table lay a few of the most rudimentary medical instruments, a stethescope and equipment for registering blood pressure among them.

"Perhaps you will assist me, Professor Martell," Kennedy said pleasantly. Martell did so, and the checks went swiftly and satisfactorily. But Jerry could not shake off the feeling that something was wrong here. Well, perhaps not wrong, but certainly unorthodox.

After John Martell received the final check and apparently passed it, Kennedy said, "Excellent. And now for the last little thing. There is a pressurized room just beyond that door. If you will all step inside for just a few moments, we'll check your resistances to varying climatic conditions—"

Jerry rebelled. "I'm afraid this is reaching the point of absurdity. I—"

Kennedy smiled warmly. "Oh, it's quite all right. I'll be

inside with you. The unit is operated from within."

Jerry found himself entering a sort of tank-like cubicle with smooth metal walls and a plain bench along one side. Not liking it but entering regardless. This Kennedy had a way with him; a way of sensing when you were about to take a firm stand and deftly throwing you off.

Kennedy followed them in and closed the door, a heavy bar falling into place automatically. "If you will just take seats on the bench," he said, and turned toward a small control panel beside the door.

They did as he asked. Frank Baylor had said nothing during the whole time. He had submitted to the test sullenly but silently. Now, seated on the bench he eyed Kennedy's back with marked disapproval. "What about you?" he asked.

Kennedy went on with what he was doing. He did not look up. "Yes? What about me?"

"Are you going on this project?"

"Of course."

"Then I take it your heart and lungs are in good shape."

There was a sting of sarcasm in Baylor's tone. Kennedy appeared to consider this as he bent over the dials. He turned suddenly and his eyes seemed to pierce Baylor. There was a moment of heavy silence. "Oh, yes—quite."

He turned back to his work. "You see—I have two hearts."

His words seemed to snap the psychological bonds that had restrained them. Martell's already pale face turned even more wan. Jerry and Frank Baylor sprang up from the bench. Jennifer put a quick hand to her mouth.

Then some sort of power sang through the cubicle. None of the group could have defined it but they all felt its hammering effect. As he and Frank were knocked back down on the bench, Jerry thought the effect was like that of being bludgeoned by a huge sofa pillow—knocked over by soft mass. Then he tried to breath and could not. He looked at the others. Frank Baylor sat like a man chained, his expression vicious. Jennifer's misery was reflected in her brilliant eyes and the slim hands that clutched her throat.

But of the four, John Martell's suffering was the most apparent, the most wracking. His face was almost transparent in its whiteness; a bleak snowfield seamed with the crevasses of age and self-abuse.

Jerry turned and reached for Jennifer, his action an instinctive gesture of aid. But Frank Baylor was there first. Baylor's arm was around Jennifer's shoulder—protectively. Her head lay on his shoulder. His eyes, turned down upon her face, were filled with anxiety.

Jerry made a vague pawing motion with his hand. He staggered slightly. Then he blacked out.

Consciousness returned gradually. He felt very cold, the chill marrow-deep. He stirred from the softness upon which he lay. He arose stiffly and was enveloped in a great sense of wonder.

He stood on an open plain under the light of two racing moons. A soft yellow growth spread in all directions. Ankle-deep, it extended off to the horizon; and into Jerry's mind—without bidding or analysis — came a quick thought: *The dead sea-bottoms of Mars.*

He shivered, as much from fright as from the cold. A feeling of panic swept him. What had happened? Was this a dream? An hallucination? Were these not his surroundings at all, but rather a fevered state of mind blotting out the walls of some madhouse in which he was trapped?

He shook his head. That could not be true. The stinging cold was not an illusion. No mirage of madness could turn his flesh so blue.

He was alive and facts had to be faced and dealt with. Alive and sane, but not in any world he had ever known. Nor was there time to ask questions and seek causes. The situation was too elemental. If he stayed where he was, no matter what forces had delivered him, he would freeze to death. He scanned the horizon as he blew on his numbed fingers.

He saw a building far across the plain.

It was as weird and lonely a structure as he had ever set eyes on: a great towering fortress of strange architecture, yet admirable in the grim strength suggested by the massive lines shouldering into the icy night sky.

Jerry wondered if he could reach it in time. He started off at a stiff trot. Action restored his circulation. He ran faster, the frigid air numbing his face, turning his feet to dead stumps.

Yet oddly, all fear was gone from him except that he would not live to reach the building and discover what lay inside.

All his questionings were in the form of a lively interest concerning this new world. This Mars. It had to be Mars. It could be no other.

He wondered about his three companions. Had they been transported across space also? The answer probably lay ahead and he quickened his pace.

He came at last, gasping and exhausted, against a sheer stone wall. He looked in both directions. The wall was an unbroken surface. He felt panic. Perhaps there was no entrance. Maybe he would freeze to death finally here beside this wall with the answers to his questions just beyond.

He ran parallel with the building while the moons raced overhead and tears from his streaming eyes froze on his face. He turned a corner and the hope he had built was dashed. Another long unbroken stretch of wall. He almost stopped.

But a well of courage deep inside him was somehow tapped. He was damned if he would die like this! There was a door somewhere. What manner of fool would erect a building without doors? Again he ran.

He found the door. It lay deep in a shadowed niche. He pawed at the indented surface and almost panicked again because his hands told him nothing. They were numb and useless and it was too dark to see. Perhaps this was no door at all. He put his shoulder against it and pushed, knowing that if it refused to give he would not run again. He would freeze to death where he was.

The panel gave soundlessly and he plunged blindly inside, not caring what peril awaited him there. The door closed behind him. He staggered and fell, exhaustion demanding its toll. But here were light and warmth. The stone floor seemed soft and comfortable. He blacked out. . . .

The sting of returning circulation brought him to. He opened his eyes and felt better. He sat up, got to his feet. He was alone.

In a long, low-ceilinged corridor through which brooding silence echoed and roared in his ears. The light came from where the walls and ceiling met; from recessed troughs that seemed to stretch on into infinity.

Only one direction in which to move. Forward. Jerry began walking. His footsteps echoed and reechoed giving the impression of an invisible

army accompanying him; heightening the feeling that he was not alone; that some great intangible presence was regarding him with amusement.

An intersection loomed. The lighting system did not reach into the new avenues and there was only darkness along one passage. But at the end of the other an uncertain yellow light flickered and made uneasy moving shadows.

He quit the main corridor and moved in this new direction keeping his senses attuned for signals of habitation, human or otherwise. None came.

A room stood at the end of the passage. Jerry approached it warily. He sidled along the wall and peered in. Then he forgot caution and went inside and stood like a man hypnotized.

The light came from four blazing tapers mounted at the four corners of a low stone platform. The tapers were in turn mounted upon peculiar emblems—metal circles rising from the points of triangles much after the manner of totem poles.

In the center of the platform was a stone couch. Upon the couch lay the body of a man, naked except for a narrow purple cloth across the loins. A starkly simple furnishing for this grim room. Four burning tapers; a stone couch; a dead man. Nothing more.

But such an air of gloomy majesty prevailed that Jerry took an unconscious step backward and stood again in the doorway.

A movement caught his eye; a slight movement in the shadows. Jerry turned and saw a girl. She had been regarding him. Now she spoke in a grave gentle voice:

"Please come forward."

He had missed her. Or perhaps he had seen her and she had not registered, so great was the impact of the stark catafalque on his mind.

He approached her. She was a slim, dark figure, tiny, pathetically alone, yet she wore queenliness like a mantle. Her other garments were scant. A gold band across her breasts; a narrow jeweled harness hanging from her waist, yet giving no impression whatever of nakedness. She was loneliness and grief wrapped in quiet dignity.

In one small hand she held a staff with the curious circle-triangle symbol at its end. As Jerry approached and stood next to her, she kept her eyes on the catafalque and when

she spoke it, seemed more to herself than to him:

"There he lies, the last of our great kings. He died as he lived—alone. Alone in his courage. Alone in his honor."

Jerry heard his own voice whispering. "What place is this?"

"The room where our kings have lain in state for thousands of years. Where the people came to mourn these great passings. He is not mourned because the gods deserted him. Yet he was the greatest of them all. He died trying to serve."

Jerry moved away from the girl, toward the catafalque and the four blazing faggots. He looked closely upon the fallen monarch . . . and was thunderstruck at the sight of the dead face.

Alfred Kennedy.

"Please step back."

Jerry obeyed. He took four backward steps. Then still another as the searing heat from a sudden white flame enveloped the couch. The girl was chanting a prayer in a language Jerry did not understand. The transparent white flame burned soundlessly. The body shrank, became a black cinder, vanished.

Jerry tried desperately to sort his thoughts out of the welter of confusion. It was insane. Crazy, he told himself, even as he denied it. Fantastic, yes, but this was real. These were facts.

The body on the stone couch *had* been that of Alfred Kennedy.

The girl's voice broke through. "He went to your planet once too often. The strain was too great. Cassan was not able to survive it." Jerry could find no words and she went on, appealingly now. "But it was a last desperate effort, he said. He had to have help. He had to seek aid else we should all perish."

Jerry regarded the grave face of the girl. There were so many questions. "You called him Cassan."

"You no doubt knew him by another name."

"Alfred Kennedy." Her eyes questioned and he added, "My name is Jerry Mitchell."

"Jerry—" she almost smiled. "A strange name. In your language, mine would be Laura. That was Cassan's translation."

Jerry looked at her doubtfully. "This *is* the planet Mars?" She nodded. Jerry continued, "I don't understand how you can know my language."

"I am one of the very few. My brother taught me. All our kings have known many of

your languages for the past two thousand years."

"Alfred Mitchell — Cassan — was your brother?"

"Yes. The last King of Gant. There can be no more. We are doomed."

She made the statement quietly, with a courage Jerry could only admire. He said, "There were others—three more of us. I wonder if I'll ever know—"

"Three others have been accounted for. A girl and two men. They arrived underground—in the city below. The—" she paused. "I believe your word is *teleportation.* The teleportation directional beam is accurate only to a reasonable radius on either planet. The subject cannot be projected with complete accuracy."

"Then they are safe?"

"Yes. If you will come with me—" She turned for a last look at the empty funeral pyre.

While she appeared to be saying a last quiet prayer, Jerry wondered about time differentials. Kennedy had been in the small room on Long Island with the others. Perhaps he had arrived in a lifeless state.

There were far more important questions to be asked, however, and as Laura turned and moved down the corridor, Jerry fell in beside her. "You said you are doomed. Why?"

"The gods have turned from us. They have spoken to our kings and protected us for ten thousand years. Now the great white light no longer stands in the sky as a warning, and the barbarous Gorts grow bold. Already they know something is wrong. Soon they will take our city and slaughter every Gant who lives."

"You think your brother brought us here to help him?"

"I know he did."

"In what way?"

"His confidence did not extend that far. It was impossible for him to tell me. There are things in Gant that only the king may know—things he passes on only to his son. There are places where only the king may go."

"But Cassan had no son?"

"No. And when none of his wives bore him children, the people began turning against him. Then even the gods renounced him and would send him no messages. After that the great light went out."

"What light?"

"It beamed upward from the place high in the tower where the king spoke with the gods. The barbarians all over the planet saw the light and

knew the gods were still protecting us. Now—" Laura raised her hands in a gesture of helpless sorrow. "—now the light is gone and they close in on us with their lust to kill. With all their instruments of torture."

They had passed from the lower levels and were crossing a vast hall ornately decorated in rich draperies and figures carved from stone. Laura stopped in front of a closed door. "Your friends are inside," she said. "I imagine you will want to go to them."

Jerry's eyes had been busy. "There is no one around," he said. "Have you no help here? No servants? This place doesn't run itself, does it?"

"The word of Cassan's death has already been spread. It caused panic. Most of the servants have fled to the city below." She smiled sadly. "They try to hide from the doom that is almost upon them."

He moved toward the door, then hesitated. "Where will you go?"

"To my apartment above. I wish to be alone to mourn."

She left him, her head bowed. His throat caught at sight of the lone, forlorn figure moving up the vast staircase. She passed from his view and he turned toward the door she indicated.

It was an oddly quiet meeting for people who had just come through the greatest crisis of their lives. Jennifer and Frank Baylor sprang up as Jerry entered. Jerry looked around. "Where is Professor Martell?"

Jennifer said, "A girl who seemed to be in charge gave him permission to go to a place called the king's tower. Jerry—are you all right?"

Jerry felt suddenly guilty. While running across the plain and entering the building, he had given no special thought to Jennifer. He had of course worried and wondered about the whole party but there had been no special thought in his mind for her. After what they had been to each other, this seemed cruel.

He avoided her eyes and looked at the two strange men on the far side of the room. They appeared to be acting as guards. They were clad in tight one-piece black garments that contrasted with their blond hair. They were quite young and not at all cordial.

Frank Baylor motioned with his thumb. "Meet Moe and Joe," he growled. "They aren't talking." Frank doubled

his fists. "I'm just waiting to get my hands on that Kennedy character."

Jerry couldn't tell whether or not the two natives—if indeed they were natives—understood English or not. The two blond men stood with folded arms, their eyes on the group. They were whispering to each other at intervals.

"Are they holding us prisoners?" Jerry asked.

"Damned if I know. We haven't made a break yet. We were trying to lay out a plan. I don't think they'd stop us though."

"Wouldn't they let you go with Martell?"

"Martell wouldn't let us. He wanted to go alone."

"Professor Martell has changed," Jennifer said, "I never saw such a—well, such a rejuvenation in a man."

"He brightened up all right," Frank said. "Acted like a kid in a toy shop."

"Kennedy is dead," Jerry said abruptly.

"Dead!"

"In fact, he's already been cremated. I was there. I talked to his sister. Kennedy's real name was Cassan. He was the boss around here."

The news disturbed both Jennifer and Frank. Regardless of their hostility toward Kennedy, they at least understood him as a man. And now they wondered if his death had robbed them of their only ally.

But Jennifer spoke quietly. "We were teleported, weren't we, Jerry?"

"I guess that's what you'd call it. By any name we were hauled across the void some way and now we're on Mars. There's little doubt of it."

"I figured that out all by myself," Frank growled.

Jennifer turned to him and it was with some shock that Jerry noted her manner and attitude; the way she laid her hand on his arm and looked at him. She said, "Frank—please. It does no good to rant about like a tiger."

Why, she's in love with the guy! Jerry thought. He was surprised by his lack of resentment. That didn't seem right. Frank Baylor had taken his girl away from him and he didn't resent it a bit. But had she been his girl? After what had happened the previous night, he— Jerry pushed the incident from his mind. "We've got to decide what we're going to do."

"Fat chance. We don't know the score. We don't know the players. We don't even know the game."

"Maybe Professor Martell

will find out something," Jennifer said.

At that moment one of the blond men came forward. "Perhaps you'd like to be shown to your apartments?"

"He speaks English!" Jennifer marveled.

The man smiled icily. "We are not the freaks you think us. Our kings have visited your planet for hundreds of years. And I might add, they didn't particularly care for what they found there."

"How would you like to have me hang one on you?" Frank Baylor snapped.

The question seemed to puzzle the man. He said, "My name is Candor. I am a prince of the royal family."

"You're a jerk for my money!"

Jennifer stepped in front of Frank. "Stop it. You're doing us no good at all!"

But Candor took no offense. Frank's tone was easily interpreted but the Martian evidently got no meaning from the words. He shrugged and motioned the other blond man forward. "This is Kaaten. He is my companion but not of royalty. He does not speak your language."

Candor spoke swiftly in his native tongue and Kaaten bowed and smiled. Candor said, "He will show you to your apartments. I imagine you want to rest. When you are quite refreshed, we shall try to decide why Cassan brought you back with him."

There was a moment of silence while Candor regarded them pensively. "Did you come voluntarily?"

"No!" Frank bellowed.

Candor shrugged. "That complicates matters."

After Candor left, Kaaten asked a question in his native tongue. He spoke hopefully. When Jerry shook his head, the Martian turned his palms up in a gesture that said he'd done his best. He motioned them toward the door.

They went up one flight. First Kaaten tried to put them all in one room. When that didn't work he attempted to match them off properly in two rooms. That failed also and it turned out there were enough rooms for all.

Jennifer was exhausted and went to sleep immediately. Jerry and Frank left her room and stood for a moment in the corridor. Frank was scowling. He seemed on the verge of demanding something of Jerry. Then he turned suddenly toward his own door. "I'm beat too," he muttered. "See you later."

Jerry walked slowly into his room. He paced restlessly for

a few moments. Then he stopped in front of the tray of food on his table. He wondered who had brought it. There was something that looked like a cut of meat with gravy on it. He tasted it. The gravy had a pleasant, tart flavor but the food was obviously not meat. There was a bread product cut in squares. It was yellow, with the butter apparently baked in. A peculiar lumpish growth looked somewhat like an apple. It was fruit but it tasted like nothing Jerry had ever eaten before.

He found he had no appetite, neither was he tired. He wondered about the lapsed time of the journey—if it could be called a journey—and then analyzed the frustration that had been nagging him. It was disappointment in himself and the others.

He had felt that their salvation lay in sticking together, planning together, staying together until a solution to their problems was found. Perhaps there was no solution but there was strength in unity and cooperation.

But they did not seem to be working together at all. He and Frank were sulking in their rooms and Professor Martell was off in some tower. Regretfully, Jerry recognized the professor for what he was —an alcoholic. He'd probably found a bottle somewhere and was drinking himself into a stupor.

Jerry turned grimly toward the door. He would route Frank out. This was no time to sleep. Together, they would find Laura and demand some answers. He was almost to the door when it opened.

Laura entered the room.

She had discarded her ceremonial garb and now wore a pale blue, tight-fitting garment similar to those of Candor and Kaaten. Her eyes were dark from weeping, but she seemed determined not to impose her grief upon others. Her features were composed, her manner gentle.

"I returned to apologize for leaving you so abruptly."

"Please don't. It was understandable."

"You are kind. Has Candor made you comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable. Won't you sit down?"

Instead, Laura lay down on one of the two beds. There were no chairs. Jerry noticed this for the first time and smiled briefly. It appeared that Martians reclined rather than sat.

Wondering whether he was breaking any rules of etiquette, Jerry sat down on the

bed near Laura's feet. Perhaps two on a bed was not proper etiquette. But Laura made no objection.

Jerry said, "Do you feel up to answering a few questions?" He thought that may have sounded a little peremptory but he was in no mood for polite fencing.

"I'll be glad to tell you anything I can," Laura replied gravely.

Jerry warmed to the sad lonely girl. He wished he could do something to help her but he was unable to help even himself. "You have no idea why your brother brought us here?"

"None. No king of Gant would confide such a thing even to his sister."

Jerry searched for other queries but it was like selecting a stick in a mountain of sticks. "Tell me about this planet, this land—about you and your people."

She hesitated. "It would be rather difficult to—"

"How old is your civilization?"

"At least fifty thousand of our years—twice that length of time on your world."

"Your science must be far in advance of ours. To us, teleportation is still an impossible dream."

"Science? But we have none."

"But—"

"All we have was given us by the gods as chosen people."

"But who built all this? Who lighted your building? Where does your food come from?"

"From the city below. Centuries ago, when the gods knew life would become increasingly difficult on the surface, the great underground city was built. Then, after the work was finished, all the gods left. They never came back, but they communicated with the kings and told them how to hold the barbarians—the Gorts—back from the land over our city. But now the light of the gods has gone out and—"

"Tell me of the Gorts."

"They live on the surface of the planet. They wear the skins of beasts for clothing and they are little more than animals themselves. They are huge, hairy men. The average Gort is twice as big as a Gant and can withstand the terrible weather on the surface of the planet."

"You say they are cruel?"

"They are more than cruel. They have a savage religion that bids them torture and kill every Gant they find. Their prophets told them that some-

day they would overrun our city and that they must not leave a Gant alive."

Jerry marveled at the contrast in Laura. A beautiful, cultured woman; yet her recital was that of a child educated by tellers of fairy tales. "Have you ever seen a Gort?"

"Of course. A Gort can be seen at any time."

"Now — this minute — you could show me one?"

"I can show you a whole tribe if the gods have not stopped our scanning plates from functioning."

"I'd like to see them."

Laura arose from the bed. "Come with me."

They went into the corridor and mounted the stairs. And Jerry now saw others of Laura's kind. If they had been in hiding, they were emerging because he and Laura passed at least a dozen silent, frightened men and women who appeared to be moving about aimlessly. Their procedure was to stop at sight of Laura and stand mute as though at attention on a parade ground. As she approached they turned stiffly, facing her at all times. Only when she had passed well beyond did they revert to the listlessness that so characterized them. Laura ignored them completely.

She brought Jerry finally to a room where a great window gave off on the yellow plain. On one wall was a glass screen set into the stone like an inner window except that its surface was opaque. Laura moved a lever in the wall, then stepped back and waited. After a few moments, the screen brightened.

As shadows raced across it, Jerry decided the large window overlooking the plain was coincidental because no lenses were trained through it. Evidently the images that came upon the screen were obtained in some other manner.

Images formed quickly out of the light and shadow and Jerry was looking at a campsite spread over several acres. It reminded him of paintings he had seen of Atilla the Hun camping on the plains during his rape of Europe. Except that there were no horses in this scene—no pack animals of any kind. Evidently the Gorts walked.

They were huge, hairy specimens, the direct opposite of the slim, small-boned Gants. And thus was furnished a perfect example of evolutionary cause and effect. The Gorts had faced the fierce Martian climate and had survived to become great-chested, hairy monsters of men. While the

Gants, idling in their protected city were almost shadow people by comparison.

"They are torturing a Gant," Laura said quietly.

Jerry leaned closer to the screen. "Where?"

"There by the big tent. That large group."

She adjusted the control until they were looking down into the circle of Gorts. Jerry's blood chilled. In the center of the circle was a crude device, two platforms between which the body of a man was sandwiched. From the upper platform a maze of steel spikes pointed downward straight toward the body of the man imprisoned below. He was a young Gant, yellow-haired, handsome. He was held in the dreadful position by steel clamps over his extended wrists and ankles. Already the points of the lowering spikes were touching his body. The young man was obviously trying not to show fear.

There was no audio, but the savage expressions on the faces of the surrounding Gorts gave evidence of their joy at this spectacle. The spikes, manually manipulated by a huge Gant, penetrated lightly into the youth's body. His lips moved in a scream and Jerry could almost hear the thunder of appreciation from the frenzied Gants.

The spikes drove deeper. The young man's face twisted hideously. He was probably screaming continuously. Jerry strove to hold down the sickness that was rising in his stomach.

"How did they get their hands on him?" he asked.

"He was given to them," Laura answered simply. "They are given a certain number of Gants each year."

"In heaven's name, why?"

"Because the gods told us we should do so."

"The gods—told you—?"

"Hundreds of years ago, the gods directed that this be done. Now the Gorts come to the south entrance—the one through which you entered the city. The sacrifices are delivered to them."

"But your people—the population from which you draw these sacrifices—do they submit meekly?"

"They do not know. Only the royal family have access to the scanning screens."

"And the royal family lets this go on? Why didn't you go out and fight? Why haven't you declared war on the Gorts?"

"Fight? That would be unthinkable. We had no reason

to fight. The gods protected us."

"But you give the Gorts sacrifices—your own people."

"The gods ordered it."

"But now you say the gods have withdrawn their protection. And you have no king."

"True. The Gorts are already gathering from all over the planet. The word has gone out that the light of the gods shines no more."

"And you simply wait here to die?"

She turned her beautiful eyes full upon him. "What else is there to do?"

The youth on the scanning screen was in his last moments of agony. The surrounding Gants appeared to go completely crazy. Jerry lunged out a hand and blanked the screen. "What will they do to you?"

"I, as one of the royal family, will receive special torture. They will try to keep me alive as long as possible."

"And you will just hang around for them to come?"

"What else can I do?"

"If the worst comes, you could kill yourself."

Her eyes expressed horror. "That is what you would call sacrilege on your planet. The worst sin we on Mars can commit. The gods would not receive me."

His expression softened. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound harsh, but—"

Her reaction was sharp. She looked up at him quickly, an odd expression on her lovely face. She continued to look at him. "I liked it," she said, wonderingly.

"Liked what?"

"Harshness from a man. I can have a commoner slain simply for gazing at me too long, so I have never known what harshness was. I—I like it."

Instinct warned Jerry to steer away from this subject. He said, "Shall we go back?"

"Of course."

They were silent during the return trip, but Jerry felt Laura's eyes upon him at intervals; sensed their display of unqueenly interest.

But this was forgotten as they were descending the lower staircase. Halfway down, they saw Candor approaching the door to Jennifer's room. He opened it and went inside.

Hardly had it closed when Frank's door opened and Frank lunged out. He skidded on the stone floor, came around and dived in after Candor.

There was a roar of outrage, the sound of falling fur-

niture, and Candor came backtracking into the hall. Frank was on top of him, giving him no chance to gain his balance. As Candor came to a halt, Frank's right shot out and snapped against the point of the Martian's jaw. Candor went down with a thump.

Jerry got there just in time to keep the enraged Frank from diving at the prostrate figure. He jerked Frank back.

"The slob sneaked into her room!"

"Quiet down. He didn't mean any harm."

"Then why didn't he knock?"

"Martians don't knock. They just walk in."

"Well this one better start learning to knock!"

"He didn't molest Jennifer, did he?"

"He didn't get a chance."

"Listen—quiet down! You may be in trouble. Candor is a member of the royal family."

Frank turned suddenly upon Jerry. "And by the way —there's a little matter I've been wanting to ask you about. What went on between you and Jennifer the night—?"

"Shut up! If you want to talk about that we'll go into it later. Right now you'd better get back in your room and be quiet while I try to straighten this mess out."

Frank turned away sullenly. "Don't do me any favors. I can take care of myself." He looked darkly at the now-risen Candor who was regarding him through dazed eyes. "I can take care of Jennifer, too," he said darkly and slammed the door of his room behind him.

Jerry turned to Laura. "I'm sorry."

"Why was he angered?"

"He didn't understand your customs. He thought—"

"He thought the girl was being harmed?"

"Yes."

Laura looked at Candor but her thoughts were evidently elsewhere. "He was willing to die to protect her," Laura mused. "Amazing."

"Don't Martian men protect their women?"

Her eyes saddened. "Half the sacrifices delivered to the Gorts are women," she said.

She had again turned her attention to Candor and did not see the look of horror on Jerry's face. She spoke rapidly to Candor in their own tongue. What she said was enough to blanket his rising anger and send him sullenly off down the corridor.

"Perhaps you would like to rest now," she said. Evidently,

so far as she was concerned, the incident had ended.

"There was one other in our group. Professor Martell—an elderly gentleman. I'd like to contact him. He may be sick."

"He was quite well when I saw him last. He was eager to make investigations."

"You allowed him to?"

Laura shrugged. "Why not? He is our guest. I allowed him access to the king's tower."

"But I thought it was reserved only for kings?"

"Normally, yes. But the king is dead. The gods have deserted us and all that is over. If your professor Martell can amuse himself in the tower, I see no reason why he should be barred."

"May I go there?"

"Of course—if you wish. I'll send a guide." She studied his face thoughtfully. "And perhaps later you will come to my apartment. We can talk further."

"Later."

Jerry waited in his room. A short time later Kaatan entered. Smiling affably, the Martian indicated that Jerry was to follow him. If Kaaten had heard of Frank's rough handling of Candor, he gave no outward indication.

They moved high into the building with Jerry wondering why the Gants, with power at their disposal, had overlooked elevators. There was no way to ascend except a weary succession of stairways.

It seemed to him that he had climbed above the clouds when Kaaten stopped in front of a huge portal, smiled, and backed away. Kaaten seemed ill at ease and left immediately.

Jerry approached the doorway. It was large enough to admit a pair of elephants side by side but he found a smaller door in its huge surface evidently meant for humans. He pushed it open cautiously and entered.

He had come to consider vastness as the keynote of Martian construction and this tower of kings was no exception. Its walls loomed up from a floor of ballroom proportions.

But there was little empty space, the whole tower being filled with a conglomeration of machinery; tier upon tier of catwalks interlaced the monster-mechanism, soaring up toward the high ceiling and skirting the four walls.

Jerry was appalled at the thought of locating one small man in this indescribable maze. He could hunt for a week without finding Profes-

sor Martell; if indeed the scientist was here.

Jerry pondered for a moment, then cupping his hands around his mouth he took a deep breath and yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Professor! Professor Martell!"

"Yes?"

The preoccupied answer came almost from Jerry's elbow. Jerry jumped and whirled and saw Martell seated at a table in a niche beside the door. A plastic-bound book was open before him.

Martell raised his eyes slowly from the page, a look of annoyance on his face. Then he recognized Jerry and smiled. "My boy! I see you made it. Congratulations!"

His tone indicated that transmutation to Mars was the greatest good fortune a man could experience. "Yes," Jerry said, "I made it."

Martell scarcely heard. Jerry was struck by the vast change in the man. He remembered a drink-sodden shell, dull of eye, faltering of step. But here was an alert oldster with the look of eagles, who regarded the huge pile of machinery as a man regards his one true love.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" Martell breathed reverently.

"I can't say that I have. What is it?"

Martell was offended. "I hardly expected that tone from you—a physicist."

"A junior physicist. We are allowed certain irreverences. I repeat, what is it?"

Martell waved an arm. "That pile represents a science so greatly advanced beyond ours that we are as infants daubing pictures on a wall."

"That bad?"

Martell had decided to ignore Jerry's cynicism; which was hardly cynicism but rather reaction from nerves wearied and stretched to the breaking point.

Martell said, "You don't quite understand. What you see here can be compared to the tiny portion of an iceberg —the part that appears above water. This is a small part of an automatic system that did a staggering job. It has sustained these people from birth to death for thousands of years. It has protected and defended them. It has provided the means by which they are fed and clothed. A munificent soulless machine."

"You put all that in the past tense."

Martell stared at the great pile. He said, "There has not

been a scientist on this planet for a thousand years."

"I don't understand."

"A thousand years ago, there was great social upheaval here. I haven't been able to get all the details yet but it began, I think, as some sort of religious revival. And probably it had political undertones because the scientists were tried and executed for high crimes shortly after they had finished constructing this monstrous miracle. I suspect the adherents to the monarchy stood in fear of the scientists' power and influence."

"Where on earth did you learn all this?"

Martell's now-sensitive face broke into a smile. "I have been very busy. There are books—some actually written in English longhand. I have attempted translations in others."

"I understand there is a city underground."

Martell's eyes sparkled. "I have seen some of it. A native named Candor escorted me on a short tour. I got much of my information from him."

"This business about the light going out and the gods deserting the king. What do you make of that?"

"I don't know for sure, but I have a theory. I found the light. It has gone out indeed. Its source of power failed." Martell looked keenly at Jerry. "Does that suggest anything."

"That, along with other things I've heard, does. It sounds as though this machine they lived by has broken down —ceased to function."

"Exactly. Also, none of the people know about the machine. They attribute all their blessings to the munificence of the gods and the reigning powers have fostered that illusion among them."

"But when things began going bad, this Cassan, who called himself Alfred Kennedy, knew exactly what had gone wrong and shanghied us up here to set it right."

"At least to try and set it right. As soon as we can talk to Kennedy—"

"Kennedy is dead."

"Dead?" The news shocked Martell.

"Dead and cremated."

"Then how can we know—how can we even begin to help?"

"You mean you're interested in helping them after the way we were deceived? Transmitted us up here at the peril of our lives?"

Martell was surprised. "I don't understand the process, but I saw no danger."

"It was what killed Cassan —he made the trip too often.

Frankly, all I'm interested in is getting back."

"With Kennedy gone I wonder if that would be possible. I think he alone held the secret."

"Perhaps he did, but you don't seem too upset."

"Frankly, my boy, I'm not. The opportunity of investigating this installation is all I ask. I'm an old man. I have little time left. What matters if I spend it here or on the world we left?"

"What about this business of the barbarians overrunning the planet? If there are no defenses your time might be cut shorter than you think."

Martel shrugged, then he smiled. "A wise warning. I'd better get started immediately. I'm on the track of something—really I am. A few more hours and I may be able to tell you things about these gods of Mars—things that will surprise you."

"I'll be glad to hear them—I hope."

"One thing is obvious without investigation. The unit ran out of fuel."

"How can you tell?"

"By deduction. Kennedy brought Miss Jennifer Andrews with us."

"So—?"

"What is her profession?"

"She's a metallurgist—oh, I see what you mean. You should have been a detective, Professor."

Martell smiled brightly. "Yes, I might have been quite good at it, don't you think? Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Shouldn't you get a little sleep?"

But Martell was again deep in the volume on the desk. Jerry left, far more interested in other things than in the huge pile of silent machinery in the tower of kings.

Frank Baylor was waiting in Jerry's room. When Jerry entered, Frank got up from the bed and stood glowering. "It's time you and I had a showdown."

"Why? There's nothing between us."

"There's plenty. Anything between you and Jennifer is between you and me."

"Aren't you being a little childish? We're grown men, Frank. I think the nasty streak in your mind is showing."

Frank doubled his fists and took two steps forward. "You'd better talk fast."

"Listen—how many men have you beaten up in the last ten years? How many fights have you gotten into?" Frank hesitated, lowered his eyes. You can even count them and

what good have they done you? You lost job after job. You earned the reputation of an untouchable. Now, because you're in love with a fine girl you want to beat my brains out. For God's sake, Frank! Get hold of yourself."

Frank sat down suddenly and put his face in his hands. "I never thought I could feel like this—love anyone so much."

"What's wrong with that? It's swell and it could be the making of you. Don't turn it into an excuse for a brawl. Anything that happened between Jennifer and me is over and done with and it was before you even met her. What do you want to do? Make her account for every moment of her life?"

There was a dead silence before Jerry went on. "Okay, maybe you've got a right to, but you'd better be ready to account for every minute of your own. I don't think Jennifer's a girl who will give everything for nothing in return."

Frank got up and walked toward Jerry. He stood stiffly. Jerry wondered—is he going to slug me or go down on his knees?

Frank thrust out one hand. "Help me! For God's sake—help me!"

Jerry took the hand. "I think you've got just the help you need. Jennifer. A constructive channel to pour your energies into—one you believe in. Do your fighting for her from now on. And there's going to be plenty of it. We've got to get out of here—find a way to get out."

Frank straightened as though a load had dropped from his shoulders. "Can't we go back the same way we came?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid Kennedy was the only one with the key. He's dead. So far as I can see, Martell's our only hope."

"Then let's go see him."

"In a little while." Jerry paused and directed a level look at Frank. "I want to go in and have a few words with Jennifer first—alone."

He saw the muscles of Frank's throat tighten. Their eyes clashed. Then Frank forced a grin. "Sure, go ahead. I'll be here when you're ready."

Jerry grinned back. At the door, he turned, still grinning. "You know that Laura—Kennedy's sister?"

"Nice looking gal."

"Uh-huh. Well, if I was thinking of romance—which I'm not—" He left the rest unsaid.

Frank's grin turned genuine. "Get the hell out of here."

Jerry's talk with Jennifer was short. She lay on her bed, pale, somewhat drawn. Evidently she was the only one upon which the transmutation had had an adverse effect. She sat up quickly and said, "Jerry —have you found out anything?"

"Not much—yet."

She lowered her eyes. "I heard you and Frank talking. Loud words—"

"It was nothing. You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"More than—more than I knew was possible."

"He loves you too. I'm glad for you both."

"Then you're not hurt?"

"Terribly hurt. I may not even survive, but I'll carry my torch like a man."

She answered his smile with her own. "You're sweet."

"I sure am. Now you sit tight. Frank and I are going to find a way out of this mess."

"Do you think there's any chance?"

"We're going to see Martell."

Jerry had every intention of going directly to the king's tower. But his mistake lay in not seeking guidance. He felt he could find the place and he and Frank struck out briskly. Ten minutes later they were lost.

They met natives as they moved through the great building but inquiry brought only blank stares and upturned heads as the Gants backed away from them. After a while there were no more natives; only empty echoing corridors.

"For Lord's sake, where are we?" Frank growled.

"Damned if I know. But still—this looks familiar. I think we're close to the door I came through. There's a funeral pyre around here somewhere—where Laura cremated her brother."

Frank scowled. "Nice people, these Martians. They burn each other for kicks."

"The Gorts do a lot worse than that."

"Who are the Gorts?"

"The bad guys, you might call them. They live outside. These in here are the Gants—the good guys, or at least that's the way we've got to play it."

"Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum. I wish we could find Martell. He's probably nursing a bottle somewhere."

"I don't think—wait a minute!"

Footsteps sounded. Just ahead was the intersection at

which Jerry had turned to enter the cremation room. The steps seemed to be coming from there. Jerry hurried forward. They were louder now and he discovered their source to be in the opposite direction —from the dark corridor he had avoided earlier.

The passage to the cremation room was also dark and Jerry sized Frank's arm. "In here—quick."

Frank allowed himself to be pulled around the corner into the sheltering black. "Who're we hiding from?"

"I don't know. We may not even be hidden. We were in sight when we turned the corner."

A group of twelve Gants appeared from the dark corridor and if they had seen Jerry and Frank, they ignored them. At the intersection, the cavalcade turned into the main corridor and marched toward the outer door.

Jerry moved forward to keep them in sight. Two—a man and a girl—seemed to be in charge of the rest, the other ten apparently acting as an escort. The two playing the role of prisoners made no resistance. They appeared more bewildered than anything else.

The truth dawned on Jerry. "Sacrifices! They're giving those two to the Gorts to be tortured."

"You're crazy! That would be a hell of a thing to do."

"It's been going on for centuries. The gods told them to do it. The Gorts cut up the sacrifices and torture them."

"Somebody around here is nuts. Are you sure of what you're talking about?"

"Dead sure."

"Then why are we standing here? We can clean up those ten characters."

Jerry agreed. Wise or foolish he could not let the man and the girl go to a horrible death without trying to do something about it. "Come on."

But a new facet was suddenly added to the situation. Jerry and Frank had not taken three steps when the outer door, far down the corridor, was pushed open and unnumbered bellowing, howling Gorts shouldered into the building.

The Gant group stopped in their tracks. Evidently this was not the accepted procedure. It became apparent to Jerry that the Gorts were supposed to wait outside until their sacrifices were delivered to them. They were not conforming to the old pattern and the Gants were terrified. As the thundering plainsmen bore

down upon them they turned and fled, falling over each other in their haste to get away.

Jerry and Frank, thrown off balance by the sudden uproar stepped back into the cross-corridor. Soon the Gants were tumbling by, the Gorts fast overtaking them.

The Gorts pounded past. There were perhaps twenty, with a single giant, slower than the rest, laboring along in the rear. As this one passed the intersection, Frank's foot went out. The Gort, neatly tripped, went flat on his face and skidded howling along the stone floor.

Frank was on him like a tiger. As the Gort came erect, Frank chopped viciously at his throat with the heel of his hand. The Gort gagged and went squalling to his knees. Eyes narrowed to slits, Frank went to work with deadly precision, slashing at vulnerable nerve centers until the Gort was writhing on the floor, twisting in agony. He had been carrying a short wicked sword made even more vicious by a saw-tooth edge. This he had dropped. Frank picked it up and jammed it into his throat, then stepped back and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

It was Jerry's turn to stare open-mouthed. "Good Lord, man! How come you ever lost a fight? How did you avoid doing murder with all those brawls—?"

"I never lost my head to that extent. Come on. Those Gant characters are in trouble."

Frank started up the corridor with Jerry at his heels. And they found that the Gants were indeed in trouble. They had blundered into a blind passage and the Gorts were tumbling in after them. Jerry had snatched the sword from the dead Gort's throat and was wielding it with more fire than skill as he drove in behind the barbarians. Frank wreaked as much damage with his bare hands.

The trapped Gnats turned and fought like cornered rats —from sheer desperation. Jerry skewered a Gort and had difficulty in drawing out the jagged sword. Frank exercised his amazing judo skill and his mastery of leverage to hurl one of the giants full in the faces of four others, bringing them down in a heap.

Now, one of the Gorts looked around apprehensively and gave a command. Instantly the others ceased hostilities and tumbled toward the exit into the main corridor. Once clear, they fled without apol-

ogy toward the outer door. The battle was over.

One Gant was dead, two were injured. The others looked at each other in wonder and began babbling among themselves. Watching from out in the corridor, Jerry said, "They must be telling each other how they licked the Gorts."

Frank was wiping blood from his face. "Well, didn't they? At least they helped."

"I don't think the Gorts were chased away. It looked like a scouting party to me. I think they just came in to test the defenses. Since the light went out the tribes have been gathering from all over the planet. They intend to take the city."

"Then something ought to be done about locking that door out there. No use making it easy for them to get in."

The Gants had picked up their dead and wounded and hurried away. They acknowledged Jerry and Frank only with anxious looks as though not aware they had fought on the Gant side.

Jerry watched them thoughtfully as they left. "I don't think they'll do a thing. I think they'll just sit and wait to be tortured and killed."

"That's not natural."

"These aren't a natural people. All their lives they have depended on what they call the gods to protect them. With the protection withdrawn a fatalism has set in. You know—Kismet—God's will—that sort of thing."

Frank tested his right arm for a sprain. "Well, we've got our own troubles. Think you can get us out of here? I'd like to locate Martell. Maybe he knows what the score is."

"Let's hope he's found out something. Come on."

It took Jerry half an hour to riddle out the maze and find a familiar landmark. After that the going was swift and they soon entered the tower of kings.

Frank did not register the amazement Jerry had shown at first sight of the vast plant. Frank surveyed it critically and said, "Brother! This thing was laid out by a drunken architect with the blind staggers."

"Martell was highly impressed."

"I don't blame him. What does it do? Turn on the water faucets?"

"Martell seems to think it does everything."

"I wonder where he is?"

"If we yell he ought to hear us."

"Then let's yell."

They yelled and faintly, from far up, came an answering voice. They moved in that general direction, up the ladders and along the catwalks until they saw Martell hurrying toward them. He was out of breath but Jerry noted that he still wore the look of eagles. Frank, too, was obviously impressed by the change in Martell.

The elder scientist grasped Jerry by the shoulder. "I have made a tremendous discovery! You remember I told you I was on the trail of something? Well, I've found it. Come this way."

They had a hard time keeping up with Martell. He seemed to have taken on the vitality of youth. He led them through arches and along catwalks until he came to a steel balcony extending out over a great pit. Below, rearing almost to the height of the balcony, stood a huge machine—a single unit obviously independent, or at least partially independent, of the whole.

"There it is. The Martian god. Or perhaps the monarch of Mars. The true king. Call it anything you like—it ran the show."

Frank said, "I don't get you. What is it?"

"An electronic brain. A giant calculating machine."

Frank was disappointed. "Is that all?"

"Is that *all!* Young man, I'm afraid my poor command of language keeps me from defining the magnitude of this machine. I myself have got only a small inkling of what it can do."

"All right—what *can* it do?"

Martell's face turned sad. "Nothing now. The fuel supply is exhausted and there has been mechanical failure."

"Then I'd say the thing's not so hot."

Frank could have been insulting Martell's wife. "That machine worked and sustained itself for thousands of years without a wrench being put to a bolt! The men who built it make the term *genius* inadequate. No wonder they thought of us as cave men, even with what science we had. They not only built the machine but they invented a mathematical language that enabled even morons to man the problem-feed."

"If you say it's a supermechanism, Professor—" Jerry said.

"Let me be more specific. This machine proves what I have claimed for years—that there is no such thing as chance in any facet of creation, that all things are pre-

dictable. As an illustration—the defense of this building consisted of a single repellent ray, not a blanket diffusion."

"Wouldn't a blanket diffusion have been safer and more practical?"

"It wasn't needed. From a feed of simple equations, furnished with the machine, this unit predicted when and where any invasion would come. It predicted also the size of the invading force and generated a ray of exactly the right power to repel it."

"Who did the feeding?"

"Obviously the so-called king of this realm—whoever he happened to be at the moment."

"Why," Jerry asked, "was a human element necessary?"

"I'm not quite sure of that yet. I'll know soon. The theory behind this type of machine is familiar to me and it does not concede a completely predictable universe. Perfection in this field consists of pushing the predictable as close to the unpredictable as possible. There are variables that cannot be charted in advance. They must be known before adjustments in their favor can be made. I think, in this case, the variables are involved with the time element. In simple language, whoever fed this machine used variations based upon changing visible conditions and situations. Probably different alignments of the basic equations."

"Do you think the machine can be started again?" Frank asked.

"I don't know. There is so much I have to learn about it before I can even begin."

"What about the light?" Jerry said. "It was the symbol to the barbarian tribes of the fort's invulnerability. Perhaps if it were turned on again it alone would hold them at bay for a few hundred more years."

Martell was frowning up toward the ceiling in another direction. "Again—I don't know. That light puzzles me. I know where it came from but I don't know how it was generated. I have a theory that it was a reflection of power drawn down into the machine from space."

Martell turned on them with sudden annoyance. "I have so much to do. I don't wish to seem discourteous but I really have no time for abstract discussions."

"Professor," Jerry said. "At least tell us this. Is the transmutation device still functioning?"

Martell fondly considered the great mechanical unit be-

fore him. "I don't even know where it's located. It isn't of much interest to me at the moment."

"But good Lord! Don't you want to get out of this place?" Frank asked. "Back to your own planet?"

"I am a scientist. There are more things of scientific interest here than any place I have ever been."

"You mean you don't want to go back?"

"Of course not."

"Then think of—think of Jennifer Andrews!"

"And you two gentlemen?"

"Yes—of us."

Martell spoke quietly. "I'm afraid I took it for granted we were all scientists."

Frank turned away impatiently. "Come on, Jerry. We're not doing any good here."

Jerry stood torn between two forces. The scientific miracle in which they stood fascinated him far more than it did Frank; far more than he himself cared to admit. But the pull of his home planet was strong and his sense of chivalry toward Jennifer also occupied him. Then too, there was Laura. She had gotten deeply rooted in his personal thoughts, deeply enough that he refused to think of her being tortured by the Gorts. Yet, what other fate awaited her in this ill-fated place? He wanted to talk further with Laura. Perhaps he could learn more.

Jerry said, "We'll see you later, Professor. I'll come back and help you with your work."

"I'll be here," Martell said absently. He was already intent on his one love.

Jerry said, "None of this is your doing. Why don't you go back to my planet with me? There you would be safe from all harm."

"You mean you wish to mate with me?" Laura asked.

Jerry smiled. "Well—yes, but we put it a little differently. How do you feel about me, Laura? I know it's been too short a time for you to know surely, but events are moving swiftly."

Laura gave the matter grave consideration. "I could never go to your planet."

"Why not?"

She glanced up at him quickly. Her hand was in his but neither of them seemed conscious of the fact. "There is an obvious question I've been waiting for you to ask, Jerry."

"Then ask it for me."

"Hasn't it seemed strange to you that with a means of transmutation to and from your planet, the kings of Gant

have never made their presence known to your people—not until now?"

"Yes, but with so much going on I've just not had time to ask about it."

"The reason is very simple. When our civilization flourished here your people were more barbarous than our Gorts. Then you evolved upward but retained your ferocity and your civilization was and still is little more than savagery according to our rules. We were never an aggressive people and wanted to take nothing from you but we were very sure that if able you would take everything from us. So the gods forbade contact—"

Jerry squeezed her hand. Again that strange mixture of wisdom and superstition. A peculiar world where even the sister of the king was kept in ignorance.

"—with your world," Laura was saying. "The most traitorous act any of our kings could have committed would have been to reveal himself to your leaders."

"But your kings *did* travel back and forth between the planets."

"Because, as time went on and your science grew, you developed things that we needed."

"What things?"

"I don't know. Only Cassan knew. Things, I believe, to appease our gods."

"But suppose one of our scientists had come upon the teleport station there on Long Is— on our planet. Suppose they had investigated and discovered its secret and come here. Would you have killed them?"

"No. We would have sent them back."

"Sending them back would defeat your very purpose of secrecy."

"Not at all. There are safeguards against such things at this end."

"I see, but to get back to us, Laura, I've discovered something. Where love is involved there are no cosmic boundaries. I love you."

She looked at him gravely. "Except the customs perhaps. What does a man do on your planet when he loves a girl?"

"This." Jerry took her in his arms and kissed her. She was not yielding nor did she draw away.

"In Gant," Laura said, "the girl would respond this way." Her fingertips moved gently up and down over the back of Jerry's neck. His nerves tingled.

"Then you love me enough to leave with me?"

"No. I can never leave Gant. But I do love you."

"I'm very grateful and of course I'll stay here. Nothing will ever make me leave you or this place."

Again he kissed her and looked deep into her troubled eyes. "But then you would die," she said softly. "I don't want you to die."

"We aren't dead yet. I'll go now. I must help Professor Martell with the machine."

Her eyes questioned. "With what?"

"Never mind. Perhaps we can propitiate the gods. Perhaps they will again defend Gant."

"But we have no king through which they can speak."

"The gods are all-powerful. If they relent, they will find a way to speak."

He left her and returned to the king's tower and was surprised to find Frank, his jacket off, half-buried in a mass of complicated wiring. Jerry said, "I thought you were interested in getting back home and nothing else."

Frank straightened up, grinning. "Maybe I've changed my mind. I said maybe. Martell's got a hunch he can straighten this thing out —get it working again. If he could this might be a pretty nice place to live."

"What does Jennifer think about it?"

The grin whipped off Frank's face. Lines of worry appeared. "Jerry, I don't think Jennifer could stand the trip back. The one out here hit her pretty hard. I think her metabolism or something is wrong for transmutation."

"Hmmm. That makes it rough."

"It forces us to get this thing running."

"Perhaps if we really pitched in and—"

He was interrupted by the approach of Candor. The Martian appeared to be terribly agitated. Frank swore under his breath. "Damn! Am I going to have trouble with that jerk?"

Candor, who proved to have remarkably keen ears, said, "Not at the moment. We can settle our differences later—if there is a later. Right now, the Gorts are attacking. They are streaming across the plain from all directions."

"Was that door locked?"

"Yes, but they've already broken through. This looks like the end. Unless the gods—"

Frank was running down the catwalk to where Martell was deeply occupied. By the

time Jerry arrived, he had revealed the situation to the elder scientist.

Martell said, "I'd have liked more time but our hand has been called. We may be able to help these people or we may not. I've found a speaker system that hasn't been used for centuries. I think it will work. I had a different idea as to its possibilities, but now we must use it. Call that Martian here."

As Candor approached, Jerry asked, "But where will you get the power?"

"Certain units of the machine are still operating from the last reserve battery. It should power the speaker system. I've already hooked it up." He turned to Candor. "If you want to save your people, there is a slim chance. Do you want to take advantage of it?"

"Of course."

"Then take this instrument into your hand. Speak into it. Translate what I tell you into your own tongue."

Candor regarded Martell suspiciously for a moment, then picked up the speaker.

"People of Gant," Martell said. "Your gods deign to speak to you through the voice of your dead king. We have not forsaken you but the time has come when you must depend on yourselves. You must fight for your city and drive back the Gorts. We have sent the Gorts against you as a test. You can overcome them if you fight bravely and selflessly with whatever weapons you have. With clubs, with your fists. You must fight. And if you fight well we will be on your side, guiding you and helping you. We have spoken."

After Candor finished translating the message, Frank said, "What good will that do? At best it will just keep them from running. They're no match for those savages."

"They may be—if you help them. I have found some tools used I think in the construction of this machine. Hammers and pile drivers using the ray principle. They would make admirable weapons if you care to turn them against the Gants in battle."

"Why didn't you say so? Where are they . . . ?"

The Gorts, streaming in through the sacrificial door, had mounted to the second level of the building. Nothing was in their way until the first blast of Candor's pile driver hit them, tearing the flesh of the advance cordon to bits. Frank and Jerry added their own blasts to the defense and

the Gorts, confused, fell back. Jerry was surprised at the number of Gants drawn from the lower recesses by Martell's message. But upon arrival they appeared to think better of their judgment and had done little in the way of fighting.

But at sight of the Gorts falling back, they gained courage and some of them even moved into the battle. Jerry pushed close to Frank. "Jennifer and Laura," he said. "Do you think they're safe?"

The Gorts were reforming, getting set for another advance. Obviously, they were not cowards. Frank said, "You go and see. One of us has to stay here."

"I'll stay. You go."

"Do as I tell you," Frank snarled. "I'm ten times the fighter you are. I can do more good here."

Jerry agreed reluctantly. He turned and bounded up the stairs, realizing he didn't know the location of Laura's apartment. Would he be able to find her in time?

Search was not necessary. As he came to the third level, he saw her coming out of his own room. She ran to him. "Jerry!"

He caught her in his arms. "We're fighting," he said. "I've got to get back. But is there any place you can take Jennifer and hide until we've driven them out of the building?"

"You can never drive them out."

He was annoyed. "Cut out that 'it is written' stuff. How do you know we can't? We can at least try."

She looked at him in silence for a moment and he wondered what was going on in her mind. Then she said, "There is a place. I have already taken Jennifer there. But you must come with me and lock the door from the outside if you want us to be completely safe."

"Then let's hurry. They need me downstairs."

"Let me see your weapon."

He handed it to her absently as they hurried toward the fourth level. When they reached it, Laura pointed to a door. "There. Jennifer is inside. She wants to say a word to you."

Jerry yanked the door open and rushed inside. He stopped suddenly. Jennifer was not there. The room was completely empty. A room that looked exactly like Kennedy's teleport back on Long Island.

Jerry heard a sweet yearning voice. "Goodbye, my love."

He tried to turn but even

in the instant he blacked out . . .

There was quite a little talk about Jerry Mitchell's case at the hospital. A pretty nurse was asking a young interne about it.

The interne said, "Funny case. He was found wandering around out on Long Island. He was in a hell of a shape. Right near that house that blew up and burned last week. He seemed to be trying to find the house and babbled something about a teleport station. How about a date tonight?"

The nurse laughed. "That's logical?"

"A date?"

"No. He's a physicist. When that kind cracks up you wouldn't expect them to rave about ordinary things. They'd be concerned about teleportation at the very least. By the way—what is teleportation?"

"You got me. Come on. How about a date?"

"No. Was anything saved at that house? I heard they thought it was a bomb or something."

"You're just plain contrary. Maybe it was a bomb but it could have been a gas explosion that started the fire. Anyhow the place burned completely. Be a good egg. We'll go dancing."

"It's afterward I'm worried about. Do they think this Mitchell will come out of it?"

"I'll take you straight home after. Dunno. He's okay now but he seems to have a permanent mental block. Can't account for some of his time. I kind of doubt if he ever will."

"To whose home—yours or mine?"

"Baby—you should trust me!"

"As the man said just before he stole the gal's virginity."

"But we're grown up. We're adult about those things."

"Aren't we though? Okay . . ."

Frank came wearily to Jennifer's room. He found Laura there. "We chased them away, he said, "but they're massing out on the plain. They'll try again." Jennifer kissed him. He said, "Everything's going to be all right, honey. Where's Jerry. He came up here to—"

"I sent him back," Laura said.

"Sent him back where?"

"To his own planet."

"You mean the guy turned yellow?"

"Yellow—?"

"Ran away?"

"He had nothing to do with it. I tricked him. I couldn't let him die."

"Then he'll be back."

"No. He will not remember having been here. There is a method by which all recollection is shocked from the mind when necessary. I used it on Jerry."

"I still say he'll come—some way—somehow. He was in love with you."

"He cannot come back. Casson demolished the station on your planet. He left a time explosive behind him before he returned to our planet the last time."

"For God's sake, why?"

"Because the disappearance of you and your friends would cause investigation. The channel had to be hidden at all costs."

"I still say he'll come back," Frank said stubbornly. But in his heart, he did not believe it. He took Jennifer in his arms. "Don't worry, honey. We'll lick the Gorts. There's a lot of good manpower in this layout. And with Martell's brains . . ."

Jerry Mitchell recovered completely except he was never able to remember how he got to Long Island. He thought it had to do with a man named Kennedy, but Kennedy, who owned the burned estate vanished and could never be located.

Two scientists and a girl disappeared about the same time and the experts thought they had possibly been lured behind the Iron Curtain. But nothing was ever proved.

Jerry Mitchell was bothered for a time by recollections—faint and annoying—of things he knew could not possibly have happened. His loneliness became acute and after a while he met and fell completely in love with a nice girl and married her.

They were very happy together. **THE END**

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THE HERO

By MILTON LESSER

He returned to earth, a hero, gracefully accepting the adulation of millions. He was a fine figure of a man, completely worthy of all they did for him and every citizen realized how great he was. Except for a single child who listened and watched and said to himself, "I am going to kill this man."

IT'S WHAT you get for being a kid, I guess. I'll admit it, I was jealous when Nelson Rutledge returned to our town. I hated the sight of Nelson Rutledge. I hated the high school band for playing those stirring victory marches they play so well. I hated the crowds and the noise and the laughter and the bright streamers and the confetti and everything they greeted Nelson Rutledge with. I hated the reporters from the New York newspapers who came down to cover Nelson Rutledge's homecoming. He'd already been to Washington and New York, of course, to see the President and the United Nations. He was getting another homecoming here in his hometown. And I hated it.

Because Nelson Rutledge shouldn't have been alone. My Dad should have been with him, only my Dad was dead out there somewhere in Alpha Centauri.

People began to talk about me right after the homecoming celebration. That Barry Green sure is a sullen child, they said. It's a tragedy what happened to his father, they said, but what's done is done and Nelson Rutledge has taken the next great step for-

ward for humanity, and since Barry Green's father helped make that so magnificent achievement possible, Barry oughtn't to be so sullen.

Even my mother figured it ought to be that way. Two days after Nelson Rutledge had come back to our town she said, "You're the man in this house now, Barry. Tonight you're going to have to act like one."

I didn't know what was coming. I said, "Don't worry about me, Mom."

"I know this is going to be difficult for you," my mother said. She's a slim, dark-haired woman in her middle thirties. I guess I must be getting grown up, because although I'm twelve I didn't think the way I used to that being in your middle thirties was practically the same as being senile.

"What's going to be difficult for me?" I asked.

"I've invited Nelson Rutledge and his son here for dinner tonight."

"Hey, *Mom!*"

"Now you listen to me, Barry Green. I wanted to do it, you understand? Nelson Rutledge was your father's best friend. Besides, he was with your father out there in Alpha Centauri. He can tell us the last thing your father said and did. Don't you want to know?"

"I guess so, but—"

"But what? Tommy Rutledge hasn't been lording it all around the schoolyard, has he? Is that it?"

"No . . ."

"Then what?"

"Forget it, Mom. I'll be all right tonight. I promise."

My mother kissed me on the cheek and went to make the stuffing for her turkey. Right away I started thinking, Holy Mackerel, Nelson Rutledge's wife has been dead for years so maybe he's got designs on Mom.

Tommy Rutledge has freckles all over his face and he's always grinning at you and talking friendly. You just can't dislike Tommy Rutledge.

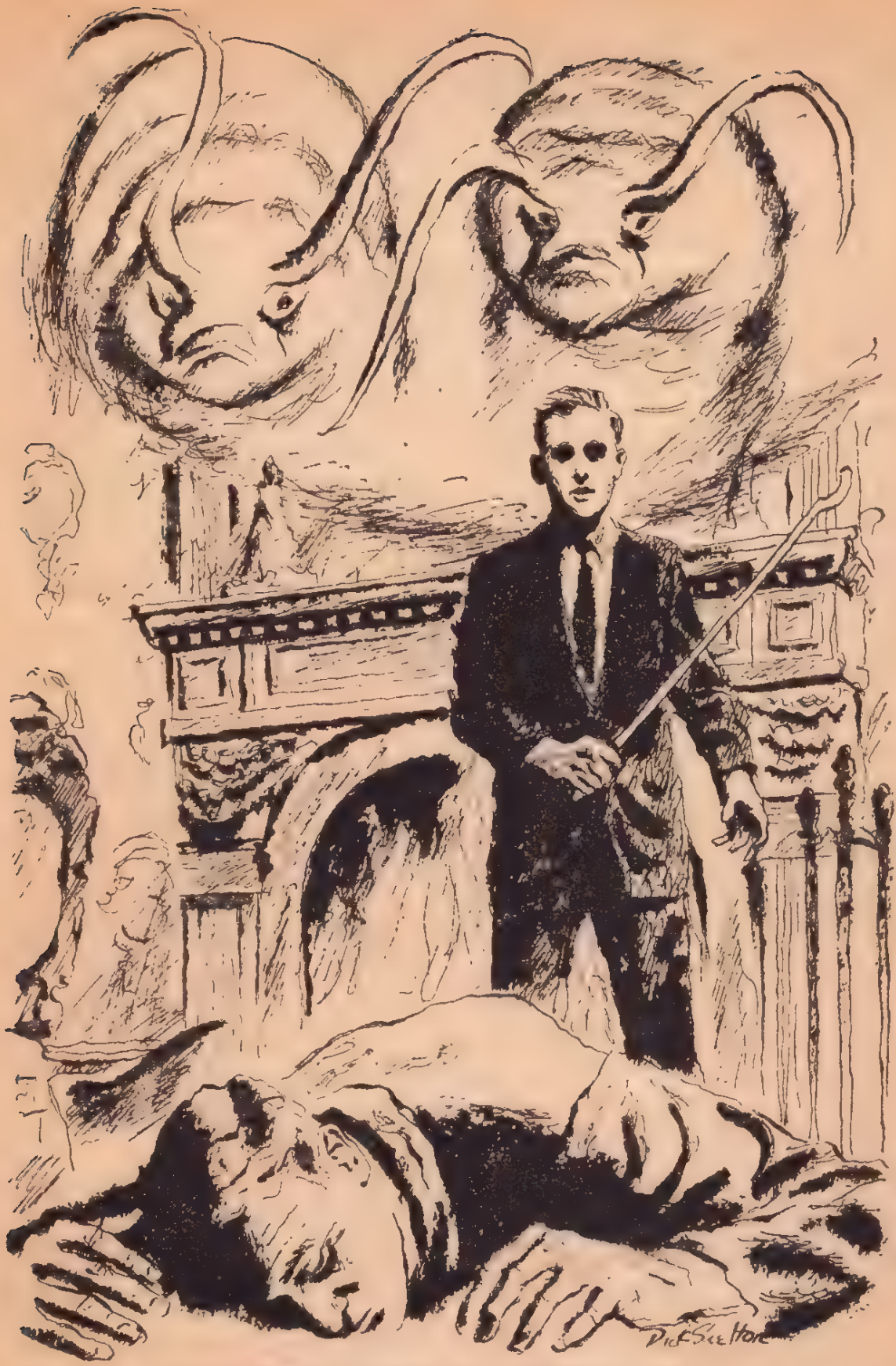
"Howsaboy, Barry?" he shouted as my Mom led Nelson Rutledge into the next room. I had smiled, wooden-faced, at Nelson Rutledge. I had let him shake my hand, man-to-man fashion.

"Great," I said automatically. "Just great."

"Boy, have you got a sour puss."

I grinned. The way he was grinning all the time, it was contagious. "I'll live," I said.

"You'll survive," he said.



He gripped the poker and advanced grimly.

We sat down and clapped each other on the thigh, still grinning. I liked Tommy Rutledge. It's too bad I liked him. It would have been easier if I didn't.

About half an hour after the Rutledges, father and son, got there, my mother went into the kitchen to baste her turkey or whatever a hostess does in the kitchen before dinner is served. Tommy was up in my bedroom looking at my astronomy books and the big star charts which decorated the walls and the kodachrome taken on the Martian north pole at high noon in summer by my Dad on his last successful expedition.

I paced around the living room for a while and then I figured Mom would like it if I went in and acted friendly with Nelson Rutledge, because he was our guest. He was sitting out on the enclosed porch and I went out there quietly. It wasn't intentional: that's the way I walk, without much noise.

The autumn sun had already set, painting the western sky with red and purple. A brisk wind was blowing in from the mountains and the sea beyond them. I almost thought I could smell the brine of the sea, which was very unusual in our town. Nelson Rutledge was seated on a wicker-backed chair between me and the setting sun so all I could see of the Great Man was his silhouette. There was no one else on the porch.

But Nelson Rutledge was talking to someone.

Mumbling, really. So softly you could hardly make out the words. I shouldn't have listened. It was impolite. But waiting on the porch like that, Nelson Rutledge shouldn't have been talking to himself. Besides, it wasn't just jealousy. I hated Nelson Rutledge for some reason I couldn't figure out. Call it intuition if you want, but I read in one of my mother's psych books somewhere that one day soon they'll be able to explain intuition scientifically. Anyway, I listened to him mumbling to himself.

"They lionized me," he said. He seemed very happy about it. He seemed excited. "In New York at the United Nations and in Washington at the capital of their strongest country. When I came home to my hometown, I was a conquering hero. I never saw anything like it. But it certainly fits in admirably with our plans. They're naive. They trust me. They never trusted someone so much in their history.

"With Jeffrey Green I cancelled their earthbound heritage by landing on their planet's satellite and on three of their Solar System's planets. Naturally, there was no intelligent life. They weren't satisfied. They wanted more. They wanted adventure. So they sent Green and me to Alpha Centauri and . . ."

His voice trailed off. He shook his head as if he had just been swimming underwater and broke surface. He looked at me. I couldn't see his eyes because the setting sun was behind him. He was just a black shadow sitting there but I knew he was looking at me. In a very soft voice, almost a whisper, he said, "How long have you been standing there like that, Barry?"

"Oh, a while, I guess," I said, purposely vague.

"What did you hear?"

"Hear? Should I have heard anything, Mr. Rutledge?"

He got up and came over to me. He's a big man with wide shoulders and a good physique. He's built just about the way my Dad was. When they were younger they played college football together and Nelson Rutledge made end on the All-Conference team.

"I guess not," he said finally, shaking his head. "But you shouldn't go spying on people."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," I said. For some reason, I wanted to taunt him. I had to taunt him. So I said, "Tell me, Mr. Rutledge, what does lionized mean?"

He reached me very quickly. He got his big hand on my shoulder and his fingers squeezed. My whole shoulder went numb and I wanted to call out but didn't. I clamped my lips shut and he still squeezed and I could feel my eyes filling with tears. He had swung around so that the setting sun's final light was now in front of both of us. I could see his face for the first time. Nelson Rutledge is a handsome man, but he looked awful right then. It was his eyes only. There was something in his eyes that didn't belong. I don't know what and I don't know why. It was—it was like, well, if your town has a cistern of clear cold mountain water but there's the carcass of a dead animal rotting away in it.

"You're hurting me, Mr. Rutledge," I said.

"I want you to tell me exactly what you heard."

"I won't tell you anything until you let go of me."

Reluctantly, the pressure was eased. Reluctantly, his hand slid off my shoulder.

"Now then. What did you hear?"

"Nothing," I lied. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you touch me again I'll call my mother."

Just then Mom called, "Dinner! Dinner, everybody."

Automatically, I headed for the kitchen. But I hadn't taken two steps when he caught me with his hand again, this time gently.

"How would you like to hear," he asked quickly, "exactly how your father died?"

"I'd like to hear that," I said.

"If you don't tell your mother about anything that happened out here, I'll tell you exactly how your father died. Is it a deal?"

"When will you tell me?" I wanted to know. I was trying to keep the eagerness from my voice. Kids aren't very good at that and I could see the way Nelson Rutledge was smiling he knew I was eager all right.

"End of the week," he said. "My place. Say, after school on Friday?"

"Well, if you can't make it sooner."

"Then after school on Friday it is. But remember, not one word about what happened."

There was dinner and small talk after dinner and I guess my mother was too polite to ask Nelson Rutledge about Dad the first time, because she didn't bring up the subject at all. After a while the two Rutledges left and my mother looked almost happy for the first time since my father's death.

"Well, how did you like him, Barry?" she said.

"He was all right, I guess."

"All right? Nelson Rutledge was your father's best friend. And he's a great man now."

We talked a little more about it, then I helped Mom with the dishes and went off to bed. All the rest of that week I couldn't get anything done in school or at home or anywhere. I only remembered how Nelson Rutledge had been talking to himself. That was all I could think about. It wasn't just that he talked to himself. A lot of people do that and all of them aren't crazy. It was what he said.

He had talked about human beings, about earth people, as if he wasn't one of them. He had talked about them in the third person, like you might talk about a herd of cattle. It

didn't make sense and I knew I had to find out about it. Somehow, incredibly, I figured it had something to do with my father's death.

Friday was the first cold, sullen day of autumn. A pretty strong wind whipped up and tore the dying leaves from the trees and swirled them around, piling them ten feet high against the cyclone fence of the schoolyard as I went by on the way to Nelson Rutledge's house. There was a nip in the air, all right. It made my ears go numb, and my fingers and the tip of my nose. Blue ribbons of smoke drifted up out of a lot of chimneys in our town for the first time since early spring. The sky was gray and brooding and I thought if it got any colder it would snow. That's the way the weather is around here — sudden changes.

I should have guessed something was fishy when Tommy Rutledge wasn't home. Tommy was my friend. If I was coming to visit his father, Tommy would be home. Unless Nelson Rutledge hadn't told Tommy I was coming.

The Rutledge place is on the edge of town, about a quarter of a mile past where the railroad tracks go by Hank Miller's big red barn, the one that attracts all the tourists. The Rutledge place was a big old colonial house, something pretty rare these days. It was dark enough for there to be a light burning on the ground floor, although it wasn't four o'clock yet. The light was unsteady, flickering. As I neared the front door I realized it wasn't an electric light at all. It was coming from the fireplace.

I knocked on the door and Nelson Rutledge opened it. He was wearing a smoking jacket and had a calabash clamped between his teeth. If anybody else in our town tried to smoke a calabash, it would have looked silly. It didn't look silly on Nelson Rutledge at all.

"Isn't Tommy here?" I said.

"Out playing football, Barry. Are you coming in, or do we both freeze out here?"

His whole attitude toward me had changed, I could sense that. He wasn't hostile now, or threatening. He was trying to be very man-to-man. He had something up his sleeve, I thought, and it wasn't just telling me how my father had died even if that was the reason I had come here.

We went inside to the room with the fireplace. It was a large room with a high-vaulted ceiling and bare beams up there in the shadows and heavy leather furniture and a big fieldstone hearth blazing with cannel coal.

I got lost in one of the leather chairs and Nelson Rutledge sat down in another one. He puffed on his calabash and then put it down on an end table. He said, "You hate me, Barry. Don't you?"

"I didn't come here to talk about that. I came here to talk about my Dad."

"And we will. We will. But you *do* hate me?"

"Does it matter to you, Mr. Rutledge, if one small, unimportant person in town doesn't like you and doesn't even know why he doesn't like you?"

"Thank you for being so frank, Barry. To me it doesn't matter at all. It matters to someone else."

"You mean Tommy? Tommy and me are still friends."

"I'm not talking about Tommy."

"Then who?"

Instead of answering, he sat there looking at me. When he picked up his calabash and clamped his teeth on the stem, I said, "I came here because you said you would tell me how my father died."

"And so I will."

"I'm listening. What happened out there at Alpha Centauri?"

My first surprise came when he said, "Your father didn't die at Alpha Centauri, Barry. He died on the way back."

"On the way back? On the way back—"

"That's what I said."

"But—but doesn't that mean you killed him? How else could he have died on the way back? And if that's the real story, why didn't you tell it to everyone? Why did you have to lie?"

"Did it ever occur to you, Barry, that humanity might not be alone in the galaxy? That there might be another form of intelligent life? A form perhaps as superior to mankind as mankind is to the primate ancestors from which he evolved?"

"What's all this got to do with—"

"I'm coming to that. The second planet of Alpha Centauri was not a dead planet as we reported, Barry. It was a dying planet. It still harbored some life—and some hope."

"Hope for who? If you say hope, do you mean intelligent

life?" In spite of myself, I was interested. Finding other intelligent life had been my father's quest, his dream. One way or another, he had died for it.

"Yes, Barry. Intelligent life. But almost their entire race had perished in the bleak cold of Alpha Centauri's second planet."

"You said life more advanced than human life. If they were more advanced and if they were dying, if their planet was dying, why couldn't they build a starship like we built a starship?"

"Because our progress has been in the physical sciences while theirs has been in the mental sciences, in psychology."

"Why are you telling me all this," I said, "if it's true? Why didn't you tell it to the President in Washington?"

"There were two left. Only two survivors of a great race. Their physical bodies had perished but they still existed —mentally. I can explain it no other way. And then we came, your father and I. It was what they had been waiting for, for untold millenia. A chance for survival. A chance for physical rebirth. A chance to bring the benefits of their civilization to another world, a world more backward than theirs had been."

"You mean Earth? You mean here? To conquer us?"

"I didn't say anything about conquest. Conquest is an ugly word. Say direct. To direct us. Their science was such that they could realign the electrical impulses of their bodiless sentiences in such a way as to possess— does the word frighten you? —to possess my brain and your father's. But there was one complication, Barry. Once the realignment was made, it was permanent. It could not be altered again. Once the alien sentiences committed themselves, they were committed for all time. It's ironical, isn't it, that one of the subject minds was too shallow, too narrow, to harbor greatness?"

I said nothing. I believed him. He wouldn't be telling me something like this unless it were true. Still, he shouldn't be telling me at all. I didn't know why he was telling me. I figured he had a reason and I would find out what that reason was if I listened.

The fire burned low while he spoke. The cold autumn wind howled outside and shrieked down the chimney,

fluttering the tongues of flame.

"Your father's was that mind," he said. "Originally, we both agreed to the 'occupation.' The realignment of electrical impulses was made. The aliens inhabited our brains. It was wonderful, Barry! I can't explain how wonderful. It must be experienced. But we are like children compared to them, like children.

"And on the way back to Earth, your father balked. There must have been something contrary in his nature, something hostile to progress. He said he would tell everything that happened when we reached Earth. Obviously, that was impossible. Obviously, men being what they are, our plans depended on secrecy. Your father had to be liquidated."

He did not say killed. He said liquidated. It was a very inhuman word. It had nothing to do with death as humans think of death, but my father was dead.

And Nelson Rutledge had killed him.

Looking back on it, I'm amazed I didn't take the big wrought iron poker from the hearth and strike him with it. I'm only a boy: I'm not supposed to understand these things. But somehow I knew that something far more important than my father's death was happening in this firelit room as Nelson Rutledge spoke.

I merely said, "You killed him?"

"We had to kill him, don't you see? Secrecy was a necessity, because we're not planning a physical conquest. Wherever I go, I'm lionized. I won't be forgotten. Going to Alpha Centauri and returning is better than Columbus, Barry. And we're not living in the days of superstition in which Columbus lived. I'm a very important man now. Very important. My counsel will be heeded on all matters pertaining to spatial exploration. It's an easy step from that to other things, bigger things. If I play my cards right, I'll be the most important man in the United States within a decade. Does that sound wild to you?"

"No, sir," I said. It didn't sound wild at all. I was awed —and afraid.

"You're probably wondering why I bother to tell you all this. I was going to tell you sooner or later, Barry. When you overheard me out on the porch in your mother's house, I decided to tell you right away."

"Who were you talking to out there?" I said. I knew the answer; I was sure I knew it. But I wanted to hear Nelson Rutledge say it.

"To the other sentience. The one that inhabited your father's body before I was forced to kill him. It's waiting, Barry. It still wants to inhabit a body. Don't you understand, Barry? The relationship is not parasitic. It's symbiotic. Do you know what those words mean? The alien sentience won't live off you, giving you nothing in return. It has a great mind for you to share, a great racial memory of a culture which pales anything humanity has produced, pales Periclean Athens and the High Renaissance and pales our own Twenty-first Century into insignificance . . ."

"Me?" I said. "Me?"

"Of course you, Barry. Don't you realize that's why I told you?" He stared for a few moments into the dying fire, saying nothing. Then: "Don't you realize that if you are your father's son the alien sentience will also be able to inhabit your body as its companion is inhabiting mine? Don't you realize that you're the only one on Earth it can inhabit?"

"I . . . I didn't know," I stammered. I was trembling then. I wished suddenly I was grown-up. A grownup would know what to do about this. At any moment I expected something alien to enter my brain.

"The reason I have told you," Nelson Rutledge said, "is because the occupation must be on a voluntary level. Occupation of your mind by force is impossible. Now, Barry—will you co-operate with us? Will you help us rule the world? We need you here very much."

I tried to keep my face blank. Kids aren't very good at it. Grownups are much better. *But I had to keep my face blank because I knew Nelson Rutledge was telling the truth and I knew at once that I would have to kill him, whatever the consequences.*

I stood up and paced back and forth. "I'll have to think," I said.

"I don't expect your answer immediately, of course. But if you want a sample of what the alien sentience is like, relax your mind and we will allow him to enter for a moment."

"Only for a moment? You promise?"

"Of course I promise. It is entirely voluntary on your

part. Your father was able to reject it, wasn't he?"

I nodded. I waited for something to happen, but my mistake was expecting something physical. Not gradually but all at once I began to have new thoughts. They were wonderful thoughts but arrogant thoughts—and alien thoughts. I saw great cities and a mountain range higher than the Himalayas and hideous sluglike creatures in clothing and then long eons of freezing cold and brooding sentiences dying off one by one and it was a breathless alien panorama but somehow unclean and ugly. I didn't know why. I couldn't explain it. I only knew that the Alpha Centaurian sentience which inhabited Nelson Rutledge's body and the one which wanted to inhabit mine and could inhabit none other than mine were somehow, inexplicably evil. And I knew that this evil would bring a time of troubles greater than mankind had ever known if I didn't do something about it. I—and no one else.

"That's enough!" I cried. The alien thoughts vanished suddenly. Nelson Rutledge had kept his word—probably because he had no choice.

"Well?" Nelson Rutledge demanded.

"What happens if I say no?"

"I could probably do it alone, Barry. It would be easier with you."

"But what happens if I refuse?"

"That night on your mother's porch, you heard me talking to the second alien. Today I have explained everything to you. You know too much, of course. If you refuse, we shall have to kill you."

I looked at him. I looked at the heavy poker on the stand in front of the fire. He had to die. For humanity's sake, he had to die. The alternative was a subtle enslavement for humanity. Probably there would be no chains, no overt signs of slavery. But we would be slaves, chained to the alien vision and alien culture and alien memories I had seen. Our civilization would no longer develop along human lines but along those of the alien . . .

It would be a far greater evil than mere physical enslavement. There was nothing subtle about physical enslavement. We would rebel and conquer it. But here there would be nothing to conquer—

I lunged suddenly toward

the hearth. I got my hand on the poker and lifted it. Something blurred toward me and I swung around with the poker, the stand clattering. Nelson Rutledge's big fist struck the side of my face. My senses swam. There were two Nelson Rutledges hovering there. I could feel my knees buckling. If I fell, if I collapsed at his feet, he would triumph. For my actions had told him my answer more clearly than words. He would kill me.

I went down to my knees. The poker clattered on the hearth. Tears stung my eyes. Outside the wind howled and it was suddenly a peaceful sound, not a wild fierce one. It belonged. It was part of the Earth we all knew and loved.

His strong fingers found my throat. He had killed my father and he would have no compunctions about killing me.

A small point of flame began in my lungs and spread. I couldn't breathe. I wanted desperately to breathe but could not. I knew it was only a matter of moments. In moments I would be dead.

Dimly, far away, I heard a sound. It was the noise of a heavy door slamming.

The pressure on my throat was gone. I lay there at Nelson Rutledge's feet, sobbing in great lungfuls of air. I felt the strength returning slowly to my arms and legs. I waited.

And Tommy Rutledge, wearing football padding and carrying a helmet under his arm, came into the room. He stared down at me. He stared at his father.

He didn't seem shocked.

"You know?" Nelson Rutledge said.

"I know. You talk in your sleep." Tommy Rutledge had a baby-face, a freckled kid-around-the-corner look, but what was in his eyes was ugly.

"And it means nothing to you, son?"

Tommy ignored his father and helped me to my feet. "You better get out of here, Barry," he said.

"He's not going anyplace," Nelson Rutledge insisted. "He knows too much."

"Who'll believe him?" Tommy said scornfully. What was in Tommy's eyes was worse than what was in his father's eyes. The older man merely believed in the greatness of the Alpha Centaurians. In Tommy's eyes was a bold, ambitious lust after power.

"I'll go now," I said, edging toward the door.

Nelson Rutledge took a step after me, and another one. Tommy got between us but his father cuffed him out of the way savagely with a stunning open-palmed blow. Tommy went sprawling, football padding and all. Nelson Rutledge ran at me and I sidestepped and all at once I bent down and the poker was in my hand again.

"Keep away from me!" I cried. "I'm warning you."

He came toward me as if he hadn't heard the words.

"You killed my father. I'm not afraid to kill you."

His fingers clutched at air as I sidestepped. Then he reached out and caught my left arm, using it as a pivot to swing me in toward him. I knew if his fingers closed on my bruised throat again, everything was finished. He was a murderer. He was potentially the worst dictator the world had ever known.

I swung the poker with all my might.

It made a crunching sound as it hit him and he was dead instantly. He hit the floor and rolled over and the side of his head was crushed. I looked at him and was ill for a moment.

"I won't tell on you," Tommy said.

"I'll tell on myself," I said.

"You don't have to."

I didn't know what Tommy's motives were, but I said, "I'm going to the police."

I told the police this story exactly as I told it to you. They didn't believe me. I was a resentful child. Hadn't I made it pretty clear that I hated Nelson Rutledge? But I was sick, they said. I really believed my story, they decided. I needed psychiatric care. They sent me to a state hospital fifty miles from our town and I told them the same story there. They listened patiently and for a while I thought they would believe me, but in the end it was the same. I'm beginning to understand the big words now. *Diagnosis: paranoia. Prognosis: favorable, due to age and the fact that he's sane except for this one delusion.*

Mother visits me often. She's very sympathetic but she doesn't mention my story at all. I've stopped telling it to people. The word is that I'll be pronounced sane within six months.

Yesterday, Tommy Rutledge visited me. They wouldn't let him come sooner but at this stage of the cure they thought it might do me some good.

Now I understand Tommy's

motives, and they frighten me. Because the next time I kill I won't be a child and they won't call it insanity. It will be murder, even if it is murder to save the world from subtle enslavement.

It all depends on Tommy. *If* he becomes important. *If* he's on his way to being a national power when we both grow up.

Because when Tommy came to visit me he said, "Tell me, have you changed your mind yet?"

"About what?" I asked him.

"About you know," he said, and stared off into space and spoke to the second alien sentience, which still hadn't found a permanent home.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC published bi-monthly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1, 1955.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 64 East Lake Street, Chicago 1, Illinois.
Editor, Howard Browne, 366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, New York.
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G. E. CARNEY,
(Signature of Business Manager)

[SEAL]

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1955.
VICTOR C. STABILE.

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He stood ready to defend the book with his life.

THE ROUGH ROCK ROAD

By E. K. JARVIS

He was a moral bankrupt— A bum no decent man would have anything to do with. He would turn a buck anywhere so long as it was a dishonest one. Then he took on the dirtiest job of all; the job of robbing saintly men. A job that could be his final damnation — or his salvation!

POLICE Commissioner Higgins looked at Matt Kirby and said, "I haven't got much time to waste on you, so I'll lay it on the line."

Kirby stood before the desk and regarded the fat, balding little man with a touch of contempt. "Do that."

"You may have killed Spencer or you may not have—"

"I didn't."

"—but we have no proof either way."

"Then why are you climbing all over me?"

"Shut up and listen to me!"

"All right."

"As I said, we have no proof of murder against you, but your overall record stinks to high heaven. The information I have points to a cheap, unethical private investigator who has no more right to be functioning in a position of trust than any unconvicted felon walking our streets."

"That's pretty rough."

"I mean it to be. I'm revoking your license as of now and I'd suggest you go somewhere else and make a fresh start. In short, get out of town."

"Just a minute! You haven't the authority to pull my license."

Higgins pondered for a moment. "Perhaps my selection of words was bad. I should have said, your license has been revoked as of now. And would you care to make a small bet as to whether or not I'm right?"

Kirby's shoulders sagged a little. "No. I wouldn't buck odds like that."

"Then there's nothing more to say except that you won't

be bothered by the police for ninety-six hours. During that time, roam around town and enjoy yourself. Be my guest while you wind up your affairs and pack your bag."

Kirby turned and moved toward the door. He opened it and turned back and looked at the Commissioner. "You certainly kept your word."

"How is that?"

"You laid it on the line."

Kirby stood on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street. The Spencer case, oddly enough, was not in his mind. That was over and done with and with no regrets. He hadn't killed Spencer, but that wasn't the point. When the chips were down, his record had stood against him; the moment had come when his integrity was the only thing that could have tipped the scales in his favor, he had had no integrity to put up.

As Lieutenant Abrams said at the payoff after listening to all the ins and outs: "You got nothing in the bank, Kirby."

Nothing in the bank. Kirby shivered, though the air was warm. A drink. That's what he needed. Two drinks. A bottle. A case of Scotch and a farewell love scene with his office; the battered old desk, the bent filing cabinet, the balky venetian blind. Funny how you don't realize what something means to you until you lose it. He needed—hell! He needed lots of things.

He needed a shave. . . .

Anthony Caruso was a small, plump man with a pink complexion and a pair of deep, quiet, brown eyes. He was a listener rather than a talker, and appeared to have independent means because he often disappeared from his chair for several weeks at a time.

He had a stock answer for all inquiries: "I took a little trip to the mountains. How have things been with you since I left?"

The question usually blocked further investigation into his doings because most of his customers were more interested in their own.

As Kirby climbed into the chair, Caruso turned from the sterilizer to say, "Well, my favorite private eye. The usual?"

"Uh-huh." Kirby eased himself down wearily. "Where the hell you been, Tony?"

"Took a little trip to the mountains."

"Yeah? Just where are these blasted mountains that you keep going—"

Caruso tucked a paper band

around Kirby's collar. He laughed casually. "There's no mystery about that. But tell me—how's it been with you?"

Kirby closed his eyes. "Rotten."

"No! Tell me about it."

"Lost my license."

Caruso was aghast. "Who pulled a dirty trick like that on you?"

Kirby didn't answer for a moment. Caruso tilted the chair back and when Kirby spoke, his words were muttered through a hot towel. "Maybe I had it coming, Tony."

Kirby did not see the look of surprise on the barber's face, nor the thoughtful expression that followed. "Why do you say that?" Caruso asked.

Kirby shrugged. "I don't know. Forget I said it."

The shave went on in silence and when Caruso righted the chair, he said, "There's a little something I might turn your way."

"Such as—?"

"A girl I know who might have a little job for you."

"You forget—a private dick without a badge does jobs for no one."

"This might not require a badge."

"Walking a Pekinese?"

"How would you like to go abroad?"

"What direction?"

Caruso thought it over. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll get in touch with this possible client and have her contact you."

"Swell, I'll be in my office." Kirby handed Caruso a bill and said, "Keep the change."

"Thanks."

Kirby put on his coat, turned on the barber and grinned. "Next time you head for the mountains, let me know. I'll go along with you."

Caruso's thoughtful expression returned. "Next time," he said, "I might meet you there."

Kirby walked out of the barbershop. He forgot Caruso. He forgot the girl and the mountains. All he remembered was his office and a bottle of Scotch. A man can get mighty drunk in ninety-six hours, he thought.

The bottle was empty and the world was a big hazy place filled with sofa pillows to soften the sharp edges. A thousand ideas had run through Kirby's brain and they were all good. Maybe things would be okay after all. Higgins probably hadn't really meant it. Just a warning. Just teaching him a lesson.

Sure—that was it. Good old Fatso really wasn't so tough. He'd just go down and—

"Mr. Kirby?"

—take a bottle with him and they'd have a drink or two and—

"Mr. Kirby!"

—everything would be all right. "Huh?"

"My name is Kay Devereaux, Mr. Kirby. I—"

Kirby forced his eyes open, but that didn't help much. All he saw was a wavering mass of color. He blinked and focused and the color blot began taking shape; began taking a very nice shape.

She was tall and rather long-legged, but the legs under the beautifully cut brown skirt glowed warmly through expensive nylons and left nothing to be desired. Kirby's gaze traveled upward and discovered that the desirability did not end with the legs. It was stamped all over this girl, right up to her raven-black hair.

Kirby struggled to a sitting posture, waited for the floor to quit heaving and brushed ineffectually at his hair.

"You don't hold your liquor very well, Mr. Kirby."

"Wrong. I hold it like a bucket. Have a drink."

The girl bent down and picked up the empty bottle. "There doesn't seem to be any left."

"Too bad. 'Barrassing. Very 'mbarrassing. What did you say your name was?"

"Kay Devereaux. Have you got any coffee?"

"Certainly," Kirby said with dignity. "Every 'spectable private eye keeps a coffee pot behind a screen so he can peek out at his clients while they aren't looking."

"Good. Over there? I'll make a pot and peek out at you. Even if you're looking I don't think you'd be able to see."

Kay Devereaux went behind the screen and there was the sound of banging aluminumware. "How do you like your coffee?" she asked.

"Black and strong," Kirby muttered.

Kirby set down his cup and straightened his necktie. "Not that it matters," he said, "but how did you happen to come here?"

"A friend of mine, Tony Caruso, mentioned your name to me."

"Mighty white of him, but it's a bad name to get caught mentioning these days."

"Tony said you'd lost your license."

"That's right, so there's nothing I can do for you but thank you for making the coffee. I'm due out of town very shortly now. By invita-

tion of the police commissioner."

"Neither point makes any difference. I don't care whether you have a license or not. The work I have in mind entails leaving town."

Kirby's head was booming. He wanted to be alone, even though he hadn't seen anyone nicer to be with than Kay Devereaux in a long time. He said, "Look, lady. You react all wrong. When I tell you I'm a dead pigeon in this town, you're supposed to lift your skirts and tiptoe out without touching anything contaminating."

"Never mind about my skirts. Let's think about your hangover. Get into your coat and come with me."

Kirby was never able to figure out, later, why he allowed himself to be dragged from his office, dumped into a cab and taken crosstown to a place that turned out to be a Turkish bath. But there he was in the anteroom, with Kay Devereaux addressing a three-hundred-pound type in white duck pants and a pullover, saying, "Here's a friend of mine, Al. Bring him back to life."

The quart must have hit him harder than he realized because the session inside was a blur with only scraps of conversation remembered:

"That dame that brought me. Is this one of her hangouts?"

"Take it easy. Kay's all right. She brings lots of drunks in for the treatment."

"Ouch! Where does she meet them all?"

"Where did she meet you?"

"Careful. That's the only leg I got on that side. Easy, man! She met me under peculiar circumstances."

"She's in the newspaper game. A reporter. She meets plenty. Now—in there where the steam is."

"For crisake! Lemme out o' here! Lemme out . . ."

Kirby returned to the anteroom an hour later. He was scowling. Kay Devereaux smiled at him. "Ah, sober as a judge. That's better."

"Is it? I don't recall asking to be sobered up."

"You were in awful shape."

"You remind me of the Boy Scout who kept dragging old women back and forth across the street whether they wanted to go or not."

"How clever of the Boy Scout. Let's get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"I am. Also, I'm very pretty and desirable and any fool who refuses to take me to din-

ner can't be in his right mind."

"You've got something there," Kirby muttered. "Let's go."

An hour later, Kay Devereaux was saying, "So that's the picture. I'm a reporter on the *Daily Blade*. I've got wind of a tremendous feature quite a distance from here—halfway across the world, in fact, and I want to go and get it. It will be a very rough trip and I can't go alone. I need a bodyguard and I'm offering you the job."

"There's just one little thing you neglected to tell me," Kirby said.

"What's that?"

"Just where the place is."

"India; but I'd rather not tell you any more until you make up your mind to join me."

Kirby considered. At the moment, he could think of nothing more pleasant than an overseas jaunt with Kay Devereaux. Things could no doubt develop so there would be time for some intriguing contacts between employer and employee. Still, Kirby was wary. He pushed his plate back and said, "Just one more thing: What's in it for me?"

Kay Devereaux gazed at Kirby for a long moment. Then she turned her eyes away and a strange look of sadness came into her face. "The burning question of the western world."

"Beg pardon?"

"No, that's not fair—the burning question of the whole twisted, confused world from pole to pole."

Kirby frowned. "I don't think I follow you."

She appeared to pull her thoughts up sharply. "I'm sorry. I was thinking of something else."

"Let's not think about something else. Let's think about what this trip will be worth to me."

"How about ten thousand dollars? Five now and five when the trip is finished. And your expenses will be paid."

Kirby thought that over. "You could get a good man a lot cheaper."

"Perhaps."

"And the story you're after. It must be a lulu to be worth that kind of money."

"I think it will be."

Kirby shrugged. "For ten grand I'm anybody's man. I guess it's a deal."

"That's fine."

"And now that we've teamed up, how about telling me the rest of it."

Kay Devereaux's face had been beautiful in the light of

the two candles on their small table. Now it took on an actual radiance that made Kirby's heart skip a beat. Lord, what a woman! he thought.

Kay Devereaux said, "You have no doubt read fiction about a place in the Himalaya Mountains—a tropical valley high up where few men can go?"

"I think the name of the place is Shangri-La." Kirby was caught in the spell of this suddenly transformed girl and gave no thought to his answer.

"Yes. It has been done in fiction more than once with different locations and different names for the hidden paradise."

"So—?"

"So—I know that such a place exists and I mean to find it."

Kirby was jerked rudely from his reverie. "Now wait a minute! Let's keep our feet on the ground! Let's not go kiting off in search of a myth that—"

Her smile was mocking. "You said, Mr. Kirby, that for ten thousand dollars you're anybody's man. You'll get paid, win, lose or draw, so what does it matter whether we go hunting a myth or a fact?"

Kirby rubbed his chin. "You've got a point."

"A big one, so order a bottle of champagne, Mr. Kirby, and let's drink to our hopeless adventure."

When they raised their glasses, Kay Devereaux's eyes glowed wtih a kind of light Kirby had never seen before and in his mind, he said, *I want this girl more than anything I ever wanted in my life. And I'll have her.*

Kirby had gone to bed that night and was just dropping off to sleep when the doorbell sounded. He ignored it, covered his head with a pillow, but the ringing persisted until he got out of bed and opened the door. He scowled at the small, dark man who smiled up at him. "What the hell do you want at this unearthly hour?"

The man was dressed in a conservative, dark business suit, but there was an aura about him that even the sleepy Kirby could hardly miss; an aura of savagery that shone through the quiet clothing and the seemingly gentle manner.

The man regarded Kirby as though he had all the time in the world. He seemed pleasantly surprised. "Hmmm. Six-feet-four, I'd say. Two-fifty at the very least. I think you might make it. I really do."

Kirby was the sort of man who awakened slowly. "Just

what the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Leland Hamm—with two *m*s, please—and I have a bit of business to discuss with you."

"At this time of night?"

"I must apologize for the late hour, but I thought it best—I really did. If you'll allow me to step in, I think I can put you in the way of becoming a rich man."

Leland Hamm stepped forward, relying upon the shock power of the statement to get him in. It did just that. A few moments later, seated stiffly in a chair with a hand upon either knee, he said, "Mr. Kirby, I'll come right to the point, and I ask that you don't interrupt until I'm through. It will be quicker that way."

"The quicker the better."

"Exactly. It has come to my attention that you are planning to attempt a journey with one Kay Devereaux into the Himalaya Mountains."

"How did you—?"

Hamm raised a restraining finger. "Please—that's not important. I know the nature of the pilgrimage Miss Devereaux plans, and for the sake of brevity, let's just assume that the place she yearns to find really does exist—we are only assuming, mind you—and that you will arrive there safely."

Kirby had something else to say, but Hamm rushed on. "We will also presume that when you get there, you will find, among other things, a library."

"A library?"

"Exactly. Now it is this library—or rather, a single volume therein—that interests me. Let us say that a friend of mine got close enough to examine the book and that I am therefore able to describe it to you." Hamm's evil little face broke suddenly into a brittle smile that held for a moment and then vanished. "Shall we say that, Mr. Kirby?"

Kirby shrugged. "So long as we're flying way up here, we might as well say anything we feel like."

The smile again, coming and going like the flash of a dagger. "You are a witty man, Mr. Kirby. I admire witty men. I am able to describe this book to you as being extremely primitive. It is bound in goat skin with the fur or hair of the animal still clinging to the outer surface. The pages are so old the book must be handled carefully, Mr. Kirby—very carefully."

"What's inside of this hypothetical book located in a

mythical library in a place that doesn't exist?"

Hamm's laugh was like shards of broken glass falling on a steel surface. "Clever! Clever! A man like you, sir, makes one realize his shortcomings in use of the language. This hypothetical book will contain nothing spectacular to the untrained eye. Merely some writing in a foreign language—a very ancient language, in an ink that has stood the test of the ages."

"I take it you want this book?"

"Very much, sir. So much so, that I am willing to pay you one hundred thousand dollars for it."

Kirby passed a slow, incredulous hand across his chin and addressed the ashstand beside the sofa. "You meet the damndest people!"

Hamm took a thick wallet from his pocket. "I want the book so badly, Mr. Kirby, that I am willing to make a small advance on the principal sum in order to show good faith. Here is five thousand dollars."

Hamm pushed the money out and Kirby took it, more from reflex action than anything else. "Now wait a minute. Let's say I'm not able to deliver the book."

"Providing you make an honest effort, the five thousand is for your trouble."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"We'll probably all be damned in the end, Mr. Kirby, but that is beside the point. Have we made a deal?"

"It seems to me there are a few details to be ironed out. How will I make delivery?"

"No problem at all. You will turn the book over to an emissary of mine who will make himself known to you at the proper time. Until then, don't burden your mind with details. Just think of what you will be able to do with one hundred thousand dollars."

Hamm got up and moved toward the door. Kirby got up and followed him. Hamm said, "Just one more thing, Mr. Kirby. You'll find me an ideal person to do business with except in the instance of treachery. That, I will not countenance. If you fail through misfortune, I will consider the misfortune mine also, and we will console each other and forget the matter. But if you do not deal fairly with me, you will come to a violent and distasteful death."

Before Kirby could answer, the man who called himself Leland Hamm was out in the street hailing a cab.

Kirby, if he had learned

nothing else as a private eye, had fallen into the habit of keeping his mouth shut. So he did not tell Kay Devereaux about the midnight visit of Leland Hamm. Nor did he mention his reaction to one other bit of information that came his way.

This last was the result of a phone call to the *Daily Blade* two days before they were due to leave. Kirby said, "I'd like to speak to Miss Kay Devereaux."

"Kay Devereaux? Just a moment." There was uncertainty in the words.

The switchboard clicked and another voice inquired, "You were asking for Miss Devereaux?"

"Yes. I'd like to speak to her."

"I'm sorry. Miss Devereaux is no longer with us."

"I don't understand. She—"

"Miss Devereaux left the *Blade* over a month ago."

"She took a leave of absence?"

"She quit. You may be able to find her at her home. I'll give you the number she left with us."

"Never mind."

Kirby hung up, scowling at the phone. Kay had said she was going to India in search of a story for the *Blade*. Kirby pondered, searching his memory. No, she hadn't actually said it was for the *Blade*. But she'd implied as much. Or had she?

He finally decided she really hadn't. But still, why had she not told him the trip would be entirely on her own? Perhaps she'd felt it was none of his affair.

Another incident mystified him. Her farewell at the International Airport. Kirby had never met Kay's parents before that moment when a shining Cadillac limousine drove up and Kay waved to him as she got out.

Two other persons got out also: a tall, distinguished looking man, and a woman wearing a sapphire mink coat that Kirby placed at around ten thousand dollars.

Introductions were made, but Kay's mother and father had eyes only for their daughter. And it was strange—very strange. Kay was radiant. She glowed with an indefinable fire that put a catch in Kirby's throat. Good lord! he thought. She looks like a bride going to her husband after the wedding! That look in her eyes. A lovely bride eager to give herself to the man she loves. A woman on the threshold of her greatest adventure!

It just didn't add up. A newspaper reporter going

after a story should not look like this.

The attitude of the parents was even more confusing. Mrs. Devereaux was crying softly, as a mother would cry when losing a daughter.

Mr. Devereaux was stiff-lipped and grim of eye, yet a quiet pride showed through as he kissed his daughter and said, "Do what you must, my darling, but always remember —we'll be waiting, loving you —ready to help if things go wrong."

Mrs. Devereaux said, "Baby —you can still change your mind. There is still time."

Kay said, "I love you. I love you both very much. Think of me—and pray for me."

What kind of talk was this? Kirby wondered. And then they were in their seat with the belts fastened and the big plane was roaring up off the ground, pointing its nose into the sun.

And the breathtaking virgin-bride aura Kirby saw around Kay's face had vanished. Again she was as he'd first seen her. Beautiful, alluring, giving off the warmth that was like a magnet; the magnet—he knew—that was pulling him across half a world into adventures he could but dimly visualize.

As the plane lifted into the sky, Kirby closed his eyes and told himself: You're a heel, man. A kind of gray rat that's no good and never will be. You're no good and you've got no right to be here in decent company. You've got nothing in the bank, man. Nothing in the bank.

The taste of self-condemnation was bitter and he wondered why it should come upon him at this time. His conscience had never bothered him before.

He shook off the feeling and turned to look at Kay Devereaux. The sight of her made him pleasantly dizzy. It's a long way to where we're going, he thought. Lots of things can happen—will happen.

As time went on, Kirby was struck by the seeming prearrangement of the trip. Everywhere, it seemed, whenever a possible hitch or delay developed, someone popped out of nowhere to smooth the way. At Barcelona, there was a turbanned, dark-skinned individual who deftly intercepted two reporters trying to get to Kay Devereaux for an interview. In Delhi, complications loomed at the customs house until a small man in dark clothing and a black derby hat offered assistance, cleared the way, and then vanished before

Kirby was quite sure what he'd looked like.

A taxi dropped them at a small hotel and Kirby got the impression they were expected. Kay retired to her room and after Kirby looked his over, he went to the bar and found the Martinis very good.

After three of them, he stormed back up to his room. Later, there was a knock on the door. He bellowed, "Come in!" and went on with his work.

Kay Devereaux entered, wearing a linen suit that set her off like a dream. "What are you doing?"

"Packing."

"Why?"

"I'm going back."

"I don't understand."

Kirby turned and looked at her and his eyes were a little sullen. 'I'm going back because I'm not needed. I'm supposed to be a bodyguard, but there's nothing to protect you from. It looks to me as though every third person from New York to Delhi is looking out for your interests. I've got a hunch that if anybody laid a hand on you, there'd be thirty daggers pointed at his throat in as many seconds."

"Matt—"

Kirby paused. "That's the first time you ever called me that."

She came forward, smiling and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Well, you've always called me Miss Devereaux."

"Deference of an employee to an employer."

"Let's forget that relationship, shall we?"

She looked for a long time into his eyes, then leaned forward, on tiptoe, and placed her lips on his.

Fire ran through him. His arms came up to encircle her, but at the last moment, they stiffened and he drew them back.

She drew back also and stood with her face close to his, looking again deep into his eyes. "You liked that, didn't you?"

A sudden gust of anger swept through him but he forced it down and held it tight as he stared, baffled into her face. "Of course I did, but it's got to work two ways."

"Two ways?"

"With you it was either bait to keep me here, or a—a kind of impersonal experiment you wanted to try. I get the feeling you wanted to kiss a man—any man—to see what it felt like, and I happened to be handy."

She did not flare up. Her expression did not change. She

said, "Matt — Matt — how blind you are! How little you know me—how ignorant you are of the war that goes on inside me when—when I get close to you." She drew back, shuddering slightly. "How little you know of the reason for our being here."

"I'll go along with you on that last item. I haven't got the least idea why we're here. I don't think you're after any feature story. All I know is that—"

"That I promised you ten thousand dollars."

"Correct."

"But the money isn't important any more?"

He thought she spoke hopefully. He said, "Of course it's important. It isn't every day a discredited private detective can pick up a quick ten grand. When a cheap heel—"

She put a quick finger over his lips. "Don't talk like that. Don't ever say a thing like that about yourself again."

He took her roughly by the shoulders. "Kay! There's something I've got to tell you. A—a confession."

"Tell me."

"Before we left New York, a man came to my apartment and offered me a hundred thousand dollars to get a book for him out of the library in the place where we're going."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I'd do it. He gave me a five-grand advance."

"Well—?"

"*Well!* Is that all you've got to say? Making dirty deals behind your back while you're paying me?"

She considered. "I don't see where the two things conflict."

"You mean it's all right with you if I steal the book and turn it over to that character?"

"Matt—my reaction isn't important—not at all important. It's what you think that counts."

"You mean that if I go ahead with it—try to steal the book—you won't stand in my way?"

"Of course not."

While he stood speechless, she pressed suddenly against him. "Matt! There is so much you don't understand. So much I don't understand. But the glass is clearing for me. The fog is lifting a little, so trust me and let me lead you as far as I can. Because the time will come when you will have to lead me. I'm going to need your strength. The time is coming when it will mean salvation."

Suddenly he had her in his arms, crushing her. But she did not crush easily and for a

moment, her response was volcanic. Then she stiffened and was crying softly in his arms.

With an effort, he banked the fire raging inside him. "I'm sorry, Kay—sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just trust me and remember this. It isn't by accident that we've been thrown together. And we will be drawn closer, wanting each other more and more. And in the end we will probably take what we want because nothing will stand in our way but ourselves—ourselves and a still voice we may not listen to."

"Kay—darling."

"Please let me go now. Please send me away. There will be plenty of time—plenty of time."

There was a pleading urgency in her voice that made him know he could have had her; made him realize with wonder that she did not want to go but that if he failed her and held her there something inside her would die; something, but he knew not what.

He cursed softly under his breath and threw her roughly away from him. She fell across the bed with an odd choked cry. He walked to the window and when he turned again, she was gone.

Kirby waited for Kay in the dining room two hours later. His heart leaped as she entered, a beautiful, calm, completely poised woman, and his emotions were a mixture of shame and elation; a shame at having seen her in a far different state—stripped naked as it were, with all her basic, animal urges and desires bared to his gaze; an elation because the incident in his room had brought them so close together, tied them with bonds that could never be broken. At this moment, she was completely his woman. She belonged to him as totally as a woman can belong to a man and the ownership sent his blood racing through his body.

She smiled as he held her chair and as he sat down, she said, "A Martini before we order, Matt?"

"Whatever you say."

"Oh, no. Whatever *you* say."

After a while, he got around to asking, "What's our next step, Miss Devereaux?"

"Miss whom?"

"Kay—"

"That's better. Tomorrow we have to take a short trip up north."

"Taxi, or do we rent a car?"

"Neither. I've chartered a plane."

"Hmmm. We do things right, don't we?"

"We certainly do. Would you like to take a walk, or are you ready for bed?"

They walked for an hour through the town. Then, after Kay Devereaux had retired, Kirby sat for a long time in the bar. He ordered a Martini, then another, but that was all. Somehow, he was too engrossed in what lay ahead, what surprise the morrow would bring, to enjoy the effects of gin. The liquor seemed flat and tasteless.

The next day's surprise left little to be desired in that category. They drove to the airport where a small, yellow single-prop Beechcraft was waiting. Kay got in behind the controls and said, "Let's go—bodyguard."

"You can fly one of these things?"

"I've had a license for five years. Nothing complicated about it. Safer than driving a car, really."

They took off and Kay set a course northwest. They traveled in silence for an hour. Below were parched, yellow plains. In the distance lay a great spine of mountains, looking dainty and harmless under the mantle of eternal snow.

Kay banked the plane and said, "Down there."

Kirby looked below. "That ratty little village?"

"I have to see a man there."

Kirby's eyes held a touch of the old sullenness. "I won't ask who he is or why you have to see him. I'm damned if I will!"

The plane coughed to a stop. Kay turned on him, laughing, and laid a quick hand on his cheek. "You're wonderful. The most wonderful traveling companion a girl could have."

"Thanks."

"It's true. Either you ask no questions at all or they come blasting out of you like a volcano. Wait here, I'll be back."

She jumped lightly from the plane. Kirby got down in more leisurely fashion and when he put his feet on the ground he saw that Kay had not gone far, about two hundred yards, to a shabby little hut at the edge of the village. There was a goat tethered in the yard and in the shadow by the low doorway sat a naked, emaciated bundle of bones covered only by brown parched skin and a white breechclout. Obviously a very old man.

The oldster did not turn his head as Kay approached, nor —so far as Kirby could see— so much as blink an eye. Kay approached him and stood for a moment in what Kirby

though was an attitude of deference. Then the old man made a motion with one skinny hand and Kay immediately sat down, cross-legged, facing him.

They sat motionless and Kirby suddenly remembered a pair of binoculars he'd seen in a case fastened to the inner wall of the plane near the controls. He jumped into the plane, grabbed the binocs and adjusted them to his eyes until the face of the old man was in focus.

It looked like a skull with dark parchment stretched over it. Incredibly white teeth flashed, and two huge dark eyes—soft, friendly eyes—regarded Kay. The man was speaking, but Kirby suddenly lowered the glasses, filled with a quick and sudden sense of shame.

He returned the glasses to their case and jumped out of the plane, almost falling over another brown-skinned mummy who had come up from somewhere and was standing by the wing.

The mummy grinned and held out a scrawny hand. "Ruppee? Ruppee? Alms for the unworthy poor, Sahib."

The whine in the man's voice grated on Kirby's ears. He thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out a dollar bill. "No ruppees, buster. Only foreign money."

The man reached out greedily and snatched the bill. "Yankee dollar," he crooned, grinning. "Yankee dollar. Very good."

"Then it's yours. Now scram."

The man did not obey. He glanced around, craftily, as though afraid of being heard. Then he leaned forward—so close Kirby could smell his foul breath—and whispered, "The emissary of Sahib Hamm will contact you in the foothills, Sahib."

"What the hell—?"

The man crouched down as though expecting a blow. Cringing, he again held out his hand. "One more Yankee dollar, Sahib?"

Kirby doubled his fist. "One smack in the snoot if you don't get the hell out of here, and fast."

The man did not hear the last words. He was already scooting along in an odd crawfish stride toward the shelter of the village. Kirby watched him disappear behind one of the huts—saw an ambling Brahma cow move up to sniff at the corner of the hut and then go on its lazy way.

After a while, Kay returned to the plane. As she revved

the motor, Kirby said, "Your friend—"

"His name is Jandore Lal."

Kirby sighed. "Thanks for telling me. That explains everything."

Kay laughed. "We'll be back in Delhi soon. There will be a cold, dry Martini waiting."

Kirby frowned. "What gives you ideas I'm an alcoholic who spends his life hopping from one Martini to the next?"

Kay was in high spirits. "I noticed you met a friend yourself."

"Uh-huh. Shoeless Sam. An old pal of mine. He collects Yankee money." The memory of Leland Hamm and five thousand uncomfortable dollars occupied Kirby's mind on the return trip, and when they got back to Delhi, he was glad to find a couple of gin slings at hand.

During dinner, Kay was in every way charming. There seemed to Kirby to be a new manner about her: an eagerness one would expect to find in a child on Christmas Eve. He wondered about it but kept his silence.

Later in the evening a small string combination began playing in the garden behind the hotel. Kay said, "Let's dance."

The music was fairly good and a high, yellow moon rode the sky. Kirby put his lips close to Kay's ear and whispered, "You're wonderful—"

Then she whispered back, "Please don't talk. Just hold me very close and dance. Just hold me—"

"Hold you— You make it too tough, darling. Just how much do you think a man can stand?"

"Or a girl. But we'll find that out later. There will be plenty of time."

She drew suddenly away from him with a quick laugh. "Do you mind if we stop now? I want to go to bed. And I'd advise you to do the same, because tomorrow it begins."

"What begins?"

"Tomorrow we head for the hills—the first step we take to reach the mountains. Leave a call for five o'clock. Goodnight—darling."

She was gone.

Kirby moved slowly off the dance floor until he stood alone beneath a tree in which some bird or other was complaining to itself about how things had gone that day. Kirby looked at the tree without seeing it. There was something—some nagging thing he could almost recollect, but not quite. It annoyed him; like seeing a familiar person and

not being able to remember the name.

Then it clicked into place. Tony Caruso, the barber . . .

Where the hell you been, Tony?

Took a little trip to the mountains.

Where are these blasted mountains?

There's no mystery about that.

Next time you head for the mountains, let me know . . . I might meet you there . . .

Kay Devereaux . . .

Tomorrow we head for the hills—the first step we take to reach the mountains . . .

Kirby realized his fists ached from tension. He released the pressure and flexed his fingers. What was all this about mountains? Tony. Kay. Was it mere coincidence that both should make mention of them? Kay and Tony knew each other. Tony had sent her to Kirby's apartment. She'd found him stinking drunk. Made coffee.

Sinister little Leland Hamm. A book covered with goat skin, the hair showing outside. Five thousand dollars; ten thousand; a hundred thousand. A woman hot with desire; cool as a fountain; happy as a child; reverent as a nun squatting before a brown scarecrow on the hot ground.

Alms for the unworthy poor, Sahib.

Kirby turned suddenly from the tree and strode into the lobby. "It's wonderful," he muttered grimly, "because it all makes so little sense."

In the corridor upstairs, he stopped in front of Kay Devereaux's door. He stared at the panel with his heart pounding. He reached forward and gripped the knob.

Then he tore his hand savagely away and went on into his room and to bed.

By the following morning, a change had come over Kay Devereaux; a change that puzzled Kirby. They breakfasted early, before anyone else in the hotel was up, and Kay was preoccupied, distant, vague. Other than a *good morning,* Kirby was unable to strike up a conversation with her. After a few tries, he lapsed into silence also, and the meal was a rather gloomy affair.

After finishing her coffee, Kay got to her feet and asked, "Are you packed?"

"Of course."

"Then the boy will bring your bags down. The car will be here any minute."

"What car?"

"The one that will take us to the airport."

"Are we going to fly to this place we're headed for?"

"Part way."

At the airport, a twin-motor plane was waiting, the engines idling. The boarding was accomplished with system and dispatch. And with something more, Kirby thought; a sense of grimness and urgency seemed to hang over the operation.

Not until they were in the air, did Kay smile. She looked over from her seat and said, "This run will be a little longer."

Kirby did not answer.

The day wore on and the country beneath the plane roughened and became more formidable, and Kirby visualized a bleak wind blowing fine snow across the jagged terrain below, even though they were too far up to tell for sure.

Around four o'clock, the plane set down in a narrow valley and Kirby was on the point of asking Kay Devereaux if this was it. He didn't ask, however, because she appeared so deeply engrossed in her own thoughts, he had a feeling she would not have heard his question.

It turned out to be only a fuel stop, the tanks being filled by a group of stupid looking Orientals while the pilot remained in the control cabin up front.

The job done, he took off immediately, driving into the dusk, now, the sunset, and finally, the night.

After an hour or so, Kirby dozed off, to be awakened when the plane bumped to a stop. He looked out the window and could see at first, only flares—dozens of flares—stationary, weaving and bobbing—giving off a picturesque pattern of flame, but very little light.

It was not until he gained the ground that he was able to see the surroundings. It was a primitive hill-camp of some sort. A great number of skin-clad, dark-faced men were engaged in any number of occupations; some watching the plane, others ignoring it completely; some hurrying back and forth on business of their own, and others squatting in front of crude, but efficient looking tents of hide. For some, it was mealtime, and they scooped what looked like dirty rice into their mouths with shovel-like motions of their hands.

A movie set for *Marco Polo*, Kirby thought.

Kay preceded him from the plane and when he set foot on the frozen ground, he saw her

being hustled away by two fat women dressed in furs.

He pondered the wisdom of following her, but at that moment a dark, grinning, Oriental face was thrust close to his and a squeaky voice inquired, "*Kee-hali* sleep?"

Kirby, caught off-guard said, "Kee-who? Huh?"

The Oriental supplemented his speech with descriptive gestures. He tugged at Kirby's thin jacket, and pointed through the darkness. "*Kee-hali* flap-flap long way. *Adjuki* —eat—shut-eye. Huh?"

The big, cordial grin invited, and Kirby said. "Eat—yes. Knife-fork—not fist. Lead on." *Kee-hali*, he decided, was *mister — sahib — effendi*, in some tongue he was not familiar with.

His guide, with the eagerness of a true host, literally shoved him into a small hide tent where a flare burned and sputtered, filling the interior with noxious wood fumes. The guide pointed, "Eat, big." Then he pointed in another direction. "Clothes for *Kee-hali*. No freeze."

Immediately, the guide backed toward the flap covered entrance; so quickly, that Kirby hardly had time to turn and ask. "What is this place? Where are we?"

Either the Oriental didn't know or he wasn't talking. He obviously understood the questions, however, because just before he backed out of the tent, his happy grin said, *who cares?*

Then he was gone and Kirby stood for a moment trying to analyze that grin. It had been cordial, deferential —but also, something else lay behind it.

Derision?

Kirby couldn't be sure and suddenly he didn't care. He sat down at the big bowl of rice covered with an evil-looking but excellent-tasting gravy and ate it all. He ate quickly and then pitched the flare out of the tent in time to keep from being choked to death.

A pile of hides in one corner of the tent afforded a comfortable bed and had no doubt been provided for that reason. Kirby lay down in the darkness, pulled one of the hides over himself and started to do some pointed and systematic thinking.

But he'd hardly gotten started before he went sound asleep and dreamed of a twin-motored plane pushing out a pair of legs and perching on the top of a high mountain.

Kirby was awakened the following morning by a roar-

ing that shook the ground beneath his bed. Up and out of the tent, he found this racket to be coming from the ship that was just in the act of taking off—probably for its return trip, he thought.

He watched with a distinct sense of regret as it burrowed its way up into the sky and vanished.

The pre-dawn gray of this forsaken place was a bleak backdrop for a bone-chilling wind that swept down the valley and sent Kirby back into his tent for the heavy clothing that some kind soul had thoughtfully provided. Kirby did not question the source. He put the garments on and went again into the open where Kay Devereaux was just passing his tent.

He fell into step with her. She glanced around and smiled at him and said, "Come with me. The jeeps are ready."

"The jeeps?"

"Yes. The next leg of our journey. Have you had breakfast?"

"I never eat in the morning."

"This is a native village. These people are nomads of a sort. They wander about."

"They aren't the only ones."

"They're nice people."

"No doubt."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. And I proved something to myself. Or rather, I verified it."

"What was that?"

"You need a bodyguard the way I need webbed feet."

"But I will. Truly I will."

"Don't you think it's about time we quit catting and mousing around?"

"I don't understand."

"You understand. I want to know where we're going and what I'm expected to do."

"You're doing fine," Kay whispered, laying a hand on his arm. "You're wonderful. There are the jeeps."

A cavalcade of four of the stocky little vehicles was strung out in single file. One was loaded to capacity with supplies. Two heavily furred natives occupied the second, while only a driver waited in the other two.

Kay stopped suddenly and took a deep breath. "Isn't the air clear and sharp and wonderful?"

"Damn the air! I want to know—"

The driver of the lead jeep, evidently the boss of the expedition, turned and motioned impatiently. Kirby turned a baleful eye on him. "What's eating you, brother?"

"He says we must get start-

ed," Kay said, hurriedly, and got in beside the driver of the second jeep. That left the seat in the lead car. Kirby considered for a sullen moment, then went forward and took his place beside the first driver.

The latter grinned with the same engaging derision Kirby had seen in the eyes of the one who'd shown him his tent the previous night. A comment on the subject of cocky natives formed on Kirby's lips, but at that moment the motor roared and the jeep lunged ahead and it was all Kirby could do to hang on.

But there had been something else; one last thing that convinced Kirby he'd departed from his senses somewhere back along the line. Just at the moment the driver had gunned the jeep's motor, Kirby had glanced around at a figure beside the jeep; a man who had come to stand close to him as though wishing to say good-bye. A man dressed in furs, but unmistakable with that baby-pink complexion, those deep, quiet, brown eyes.

Tony Caruso, the barber.

The shock produced in Kirby was deep and effective. It held him speechless until the jeep was rocking along some hundred yards from the village. Then he leaned close to the driver and said, "That guy that came to the jeep when we started. Did you know him?"

"What guy?"

"That little fat fellow."

The driver's grin stretched wide. "You must have flipped, chum. There wasn't no guy."

Kirby stared. What manner of native was this? Native of where? Brooklyn? "Now wait a minute!"

"No time for conversation, chum. This bronc won't stand for it. Hang on."

"Where are you from?"

"Here, there, any place. It takes all kinds as they say in Akron."

With two quick stops for food and refueling, the jeeps hammered on all day; up and out of the valley in which the village was located; zig-zagging tortuously, ever upward, miraculously finding a pathway among seemingly impassable boulders, canyons and jagged shelvings of rock.

By nightfall, the traces of snow—come upon in early afternoon—banked high on all sides, furnished a crust across which the jeeps moved like four black bugs over a white sheet; became virgin camouflage laid across chasms a thousand feet deep where death awaited the unwary.

The lead driver was not one

of these. He scanned the landscape with seeming X-ray eyes, skirting disaster by inches, spurning apparently solid going to plunge across snow bridges with suicide marked clearly upon them.

Only once, did Kirby's driver speak. When perhaps twenty acres of solid snow collapsed with a roar on their left, leaving them on the ragged edge of a mountain chasm, the driver turned to comment, "Bad place for guys with big feet."

"What are you trying to do, kill us?" Kirby choked.

"Hell, no," the driver replied blandly. "Not me. I'm the peaceable type."

And they pounded on, to stop, finally, because the jeeps had neither wings nor propellers and the land was a continuous barrier.

Kay Devereaux had been right about the air. It was clear and sharp and wonderful—and something more.

Kirby began feeling it when they reached the snow line; it had the effect of a thousand Martinis concentrated into one glass; gin without the hangover lurking in its dregs.

A feeling of unreality took hold; a weightlessness; a sense of heady well-being even when he gasped for air and his heart pounded through his chest.

Unreality. All of it an amusing dream. And a heightening desire for Kay Devereaux; a want, a need, that made his very bones tremble . . .

Only once was he pulled sharply back to the reality of what now seemed like the other world down below. This was after the jeeps had been abandoned and they had traveled for two days on foot, up the snow-choked mountain passes.

After camp had been made the second night, Kirby moved away from the camp to see what lay beyond a higher ridge. Suddenly he whirled to find his driver standing beside him. The driver said, "Look here now, there's a little thing I'm really supposed to remind you of."

"What's that."

"A cat named Leland Hamm."

"Do you know him?"

"That's beside the point. I'm supposed to pass on some directions."

"Then get on with it."

"Easy does it, brother. After you get your flippers on the book, you leave it at the Spa on your way out. We can go that far and we'll go in and get it."

"I don't even know where the Spa is."

"You will. When you get back to the Spa, you'll find the hundred grand—or rather, the ninety-five grand—waiting for you there. Take the dough, leave the book, and we've done business."

The man turned away, but Kirby reached out and held him. "Listen, chum, how about some answers, or are you as tight-lipped as the rest?"

"Me? They call me Gabby back where I come from."

"Okay, this place I get the book. What do you know about it?"

"Just what I hear."

"Then it does exist?"

"You're damn right it exists."

"Then exactly what is it?"

"From the word that gets around, it's a valley up high in the peaks. Freak deal. Tropics in the middle of the mountains."

"What kind of people live there?"

"Can't say. I've never been there. I've heard they're some kind of a super-race but that may be the malarkey."

"Why haven't you ever gone there to find out?"

"Me? Don't be silly."

"Why is it silly? If this book is worth so much, why don't you go up and get it yourself?"

"They'd pitch me right out on my can. I couldn't even get in."

"Why not?"

"I'm morally unacceptable."

"You mean I'm not?"

"How should I know? I just know that nobody gets in that hasn't got what it takes. These are nice people, chum."

"Okay, so they're nice people. But you and a few more like you could be pretty tough."

The man grinned. "I said nice, not weak. Poke a wrong snoot in that place, you'll get it torn off, and I'm not kidding."

Kirby paused to muster his thoughts and the jeep driver turned away. Kirby said, "One more thing. If this is such a fine place, what makes Hamm think I'll come back?"

"I can't say. Except maybe there's no place you can spend a hundred grand there."

"Then just what makes that book so valuable?"

"I dunno, chum. Maybe it's autographed."

"You're a big help."

"You bet your life. See you around."

Kirby's reaction to the information he'd gained was mainly one of disappointment.

Somehow, it was a letdown to learn that all this was really nothing more than an expedition to some kind of a sheltered valley in the mountains. A pilgrimage to Shangri-La. It put the whole project into a rather ordinary category, even though he could not tell himself what he had really expected. Certainly, the existence of an Eden in these formidable mountains was sensational enough—such a thing had been kicked around in fiction and in the movies, long enough—but it was still disappointing to Kirby, and he had to smile because this likened him to the gum-chewing moppet who went to see the million-dollar horse opera in Cinemascope and complained, "Nuts! Only ten thousand Indians!"

But there were other annoying facts that bothered Kirby. Incongruities. The jeep driver had spoken of only the highly moral being admitted. Yet Kirby knew his own morals left plenty to be desired in that direction. And Kay Devereaux? He could have had her in bed in Delhi with no trouble whatever.

Pondering the whole, weird situation, he returned to the camp and bedded down for the night.

He awoke to a sense of alarm and came out of his fur sleeping bag to see only one dark lump on the unbroken surface of snow. He moved toward it and knelt and saw the tip of Kay Devereaux's nose and a part of her red lips in the fur.

The natives had departed in the night!

Kirby prodded the fur bundle and Kay Devereaux opened her eyes. Kirby said, "Good morning. We're all alone."

She came up out of the sleeping bag, dewy-eyed and unalarmed. "That's right. They went back. They left early."

"You knew about it?"

"Yes."

"But, good Lord! We're all alone. A couple of inexperienced babes in the woods—or rather, in the snow. Where do we go from here?"

Kay Devereaux pointed. "The trail leads up that way. It's fairly clear."

"We go on alone?"

"Yes."

Kirby's jaw tightened and his next comment concerned the meager supplies the natives had left them.

Kay said, "We can't carry much, but we won't starve. There is food up the trail."

Kirby stared at her for a long moment. "Will you answer just one question?"

"Of course."

"Then tell me—have you got the least idea what you're doing? What *we're* doing?"

"We're doing fine," she said, softly.

He sighed. "Then let's get with it."

She smiled and said nothing.

They climbed all day, up through a geological formation that was something between an ancient volcanic fissure and a valley. It gave a going that was not too rugged but extremely tiring because each step was higher than the one before.

Kirby was surprised at how well Kay Devereaux held up under the grueling trek, the more so when his own legs felt like dead weights when the sun, lowering somewhere far beyond the mountains, brought nightfall to the mountains.

Kirby demanded to call it quits, but Kay Devereaux insisted on going a little further. "There is a shelter up ahead."

Another hour brought them to the shelter: a dry, comparatively warm cave across the mouth of which the snow banked high but did not enter.

Inside, prone, exhausted, Kirby asked, "How did you know this place was here?"

"They told me about it. There are other havens along the way."

"They told you? Just who are *they?*"

"The people we will meet."

"When?"

"The people who will be waiting for us if we are successful in making this last leg of the trip."

"It's rough, but it doesn't seem too dangerous. Is there any reason to believe we won't make it?"

"It will get rougher. And this air—this altitude." She leaned close to him and looked into his eyes. "This is a very special place, Matt. A—a highly specialized place. It—it does other things to people besides beat them down physically."

Kirby broke open the supply pack. "Perhaps. But let's take it from day to day. I've never been one to—"

Kay Devereaux's hand was on his arm. "Matt."

"Yes."

"I have a feeling I'm going to fail. Don't let me fail—please. If I can't make it, I'll die."

"I think you're exaggerating things, angel," Kirby said gruffly. And his next thought was left unsaid. A man can take quite a beating for a hundred grand, he told himself.

When he again turned his

attention to Kay Devereaux, she was sound asleep.

The next day, Kirby began to get a faint idea of what Kay Devereaux meant. It came upon him quite suddenly. They left the cave at daylight and moved on up the gorge. Above, the sky was bright around them, the air sharp, and Kirby had never before felt such a sense of freedom and well-being. There was a heady, wine-like quality in the gusts that whipped playfully up the gorge, and it seemed to Kirby that never before had he experienced such pleasure in being alive; never before had his senses been so sharp and alert, his mind so keen.

Then, the sudden transformation. Kirby heard the sound vaguely—like a waterfall a long way off. But within fifty yards, it greatened ominously and as he rounded a turn in the gorge, he was hit by the full fury of a raging storm.

A blast of arctic cold smashed into him, numbing his face, knocking the breath from his body, blinding him. Fine sleet seemed to cut through his furs as though they were paper, and he pawed blindly in circles.

He was to learn later, of these mountain blizzards; how sub-zero fury could whip down a canyon and lash a man into a death chasm before he could brace himself.

A sense of panic enveloped him. He yelled, "Kay—Kay!" but the storm whipped the words from his lips and smashed them into nothing. He pawed blindly, trying to peer through the tearing sleet. He saw nothing, but he got his hands on Kay and an unconscious prayer of thanksgiving went up from his heart.

He put his lips against her ear and screamed, "Back! Back! We've got to go back!"

She clung to him and pulled his head around and he felt her lips against his own ear, but when her voice came it was but a faint, thin thread of sound in the screaming hell about them. "No! We can't. It would be suicide! We must go forward. Each step always higher than the next and we won't get lost!"

"Lost hell! We'll be torn to pieces!"

"We've got to go on!"

She was already dragging him forward into the blast and there was nothing he could do but move ahead and take the lead. This was no place to argue over wisdom or foolishness. Stand still and the storm would beat you down and roll over you.

And it was in Kirby's mind that now, at last, he had begun to earn his money. Every forward step was an effort. Every breath was a battle. Every moment seemed the last. He gripped Kay Devereaux around the waist and pushed doggedly against the ferocity of the mountains.

Time moved on. Minutes, hours, years, and life held only one problem—get that foot ahead; use your leg as a lever to push your body a step forward; breathe in some sleet needles and do the same thing over again. Keep doing it as a matter of instinct until the end came and released you into heaven or hell, and it didn't matter which.

Walk until the wind and the cold knocked you down and killed you.

These thoughts were in Kirby's mind for a millenium or two and he consigned what was left of his soul to his Maker with monotonous regularity, fearing, then hoping, for the end.

But after a thousand years, a peculiar thing happened; a new strength welled up from somewhere; not much strength, but it brought with it to Kirby a sudden sense of fierce elation; the elation, in turn, seemed to generate further strength, until he found himself wasting some of it but baring his teeth and snarling at the storm. Laughing at it.

Strange indeed, that here, just before the moment of his death, he felt stronger, more competent and able, than he had ever felt before in his life. Like a tiger, now, he drove his body into the teeth of the gale and got an odd fierce pleasure out of the smashing of its giant fist against his body. Singing deep in his pounding heart: *You can't kill me . . . can't kill me . . . can't kill me . . .*

And the mountains screamed back at him in baffled fury while they called up fresh legions of storm-demons.

Then, on the heels of his mad new defiance, there came another thing to Kirby. It was as though he walked no longer in the mountains but in a dream that was far more real than all the living he had ever done. As though a vast curtain had been lifted before the eyes of his mind, to reveal a panorama of consciousness so vast and magnificent that he cringed before its splendor.

And his soul was filled with a vast lament—*I have never really lived. I have dwelt all my years behind dark curtains without knowing the things God has given me to*

know if I would only tear down the curtain and look. I've been a waste—a rotten unpardonable waste. God help me.

That was what happened to Kirby as he dragged Kay Devereaux forward against the storm.

Then the fury of the blizzard reasserted itself upon his mind and he came back and found his feet still driving one ahead of the other, his lungs still laboring, his heart tearing itself apart in his chest.

But still with a kind of glory, fierce and hot, in his soul . . .

Then it was over; over as suddenly as it had begun. It was as though he stepped through a curtain into the sunlight with the storm raging an arm's length behind him.

In reality, he realized, he'd hit a stone wall and groped his way around a bend that sheltered the gorge and that there was overhanging rock above, sheltering it doubly; a partial cave across the mouth of which the blizzard tore on down the gorge.

Kirby turned immediate attention upon Kay Devereaux, who had long-since been a dead weight in his arms. He tore back the hood and her raven hair fell away from a dead white face. Her eyes were closed. He ripped the fur from her throat and thrust a savage hand down into her breast, searching for a heart beat. He found one; very faint; fearfully irregular. The flesh under his hand felt like cold, sculptured marble.

Panic took hold. He looked around and there was nothing. Bitterly cold, still air. Hard-packed snow. No fuel. Not a sanctuary at all, but a trap to die in.

And Kay Devereaux was freezing to death.

There was a single chance and Kirby did not hesitate. He loosed the pack from his back and broke out his sleeping bag and laid it on the ground. Like a man demented, he tore off Kay Devereaux's clothing, piece by piece until she was naked; a bloodless white statue. He lifted her and pulled the bag up over her body and laid her down on the hard snow.

Then he tore away his own clothing until he was clad only in a pair of shorts. He pushed Kay Devereaux to one side of the bag and forced his own body in beside hers.

It was like lying down with a statue carved from ice and as Kirby took the girl in his arms and strained his body

against hers, he knew one of two things would happen. His warmth would go into her to drive out the cold and save her life. That, or the cold in her flesh would drive out his warmth and destroy him.

He began working with his hands, kneading, digging, searching for deep-down warmth and coaxing it to the surface. Pleading with dying blood to flow again.

But there seemed to be no warmth.

Only his own and it seemed to be losing the battle.

He gritted his teeth against the cold and worked because there was nothing else to do. The heart was still beating, a little stronger, he thought, and he looked into the still white, beautiful face and asked himself, why? . . . why? . . . why?

She had known—back on the plains, back in the States—what lay ahead. She had walked into this death trap with her eyes wide open; had been eager for it.

But why?

Why should a girl like Kay Devereaux walk into what must have looked like certain death with happiness in her eyes; like a virgin bride going to her husband?

Where was the sense in any of this?

He pondered and worked.

She was growing warmer. He sensed this vaguely now, comfortably, in languorous, satin-lined happiness, as the superhuman exertions he had put forth demanded their just due. He heard Kay Devereaux sigh and felt her snuggling against him like a contented kitten . . .

He awoke with a start and found Kay Devereaux's face close to his. She had already awakened. Her eyes were opened and her breath was on his lips. He kissed her and hung for a moment on the edge of an emotional maelstrom, with her body a glowing magnet that was drawing him down toward its wondrous depths. A thing beyond all his past experience. Almost dragging him—but not quite.

At the last, perilous moment, something held him back; something he had not had before; something he had found out in that death-dealing blizzard. A new-found wisdom that said: *You can have this woman. She wants to be taken. But she also wants to quit and go back. So if you take her, it will all be over. You will both turn back and something awaiting you up ahead will never be found. Some great thing you've*

yearned for all your life without knowing it. Take her, and you're through.

This warning came from some mystic depth within him, but the practical and the realistic still commanded, still demanded more than mysticism and had to be appeased with tangibles. And where were any tangibles in this mad dream?

Then he knew—wondered how he could have forgotten. The goatskin book. One hundred thousand dollars. That was certainly tangible enough. Here lay a woman, but ahead lay money. Only a fool would make the wrong choice and Kirby was no fool.

Thus he came back to normal.

Passion rose in his chest, choking him. He flailed at it with his contempt. Kay Devereaux had closed her eyes. Her open lips invited. Her body turned sensuously.

"Don't move," Kirby rasped out.

Her eyes opened in surprise.

"Don't move." The words were sharp, hostile. They had to be for he could not yet trust himself, had not yet completely won the fight.

"Lie still. I'm getting out of here." He wormed his body slowly out of the bag. The cold air hit him and he had won. He turned away from the bag and grimly put on his clothes.

While Kay Devereaux lay warm and silent, Kirby walked to the bend in the gorge and looked out. He spoke without turning. "The storm seems to have died down. Get up and put your clothes on. I'll be outside."

He waited there and after a while Kay Devereaux came out and stood beside him. She looked at him through still, wide eyes. "What happened? We were in the bag—together—I don't quite remember—"

"You almost froze to death. I had to warm you. There was only one way."

"Oh, I didn't know. I woke up beside you. I thought—"

"That I'd stripped you for other reasons?" Kirby asked coldly. "Perhaps you're disappointed."

She flushed. "That was cruel."

He'd meant it to be. Somehow, cruelty was a weapon he had to use at this moment. Had desperately to use. He said, "We'd better eat something. Then we'll move on."

He opened rations and they sat in the cave, eating in silence. Finally Kay Devereaux said, "You've been very good about coming so far on trust. You haven't pressed your

questions but you're entitled to know where we're going and now I can tell you."

"It isn't necessary."

Her surprise was genuine. "But—"

"I'm no longer curious. I'd rather wait and see for myself. Hang onto your secrets. They'll help to keep you warm."

She regarded him long and thoughtfully. "You've changed."

"Have I?" He spoke casually, but he too, knew a change in position between them had come about in some strange way. From the beginning, Kay Devereaux had been the strong one. She had dominated. Hers had been the strength. She had led and he had followed.

But no more. Now his was the strength and her dominance was gone. From here out, he would lead and she would follow. He said, "I am only interested in one thing. A goat-skin covered book. I'm convinced it lies up ahead somewhere. I don't know if it's in an idyllic valley full of palm trees or fastened to the peak of the highest mountain with Scotch tape. I'll find it and bring it back."

She regarded him in silence and he wondered what was going on in her mind, but not enough to ask. "Let's get going," he said.

There followed, three of the most terrible days Kirby ever spent. Strange days of unreality and terror. He had never imagined any mountains could take so much strength out of a man; or that some bottomless reservoir could put back in its place a different type of strength than the physical.

It seemed to him, at times that he was alone with a stranger in a vast new world and that the stranger was himself. There was a feeling of lightness in his bones and muscles as though he had left his body back on the trail and only his naked spirit was driving ahead.

He carried Kay Devereaux most of the time during those three snow-blind days. Flash blizzards hit again and again without warning and each time he stood against them and grew to know that he was not moving through trackless wastes, but up over a prearranged route of some sort; a kind of test course, fraught with danger and peril at every step, but not impassable. The mountains seemed to say: *It is not for weaklings; only for the strong. If you are weak, you will go down to your death, but if you are strong*

you will survive. And if your will is great the strength will be given to you. You have but to ask.

And in his own way, Kirby was asking.

He knew the trail had been trod before because, time and again ,when he could finally go no further, his last desperate step brought him to a sanctuary, a sheltered place where there was food waiting; a place where he could lay down his burden and attend her. So often did he strip her body and rub warmth back into it that he got to know it as intimately as he knew his own, but this was not important. It did not matter. All that mattered was that those lovely legs did not stiffen in frozen death, that the classic breasts did not become stiff with frost.

And on the eve of the third day, he stumbled, gaunt and hollow-eyed, into the Spa.

He knew instantly that this had to be the place referred to by the jeep driver. The Spa. It was as though he had walked suddenly into a balmy evening on one of the Florida keys. A spring, bordered with fragile fern, bubbled in the center of a small rock amphitheater. A bank of strange crimson flowers dipped and nodded in a gentle breeze that seemed to come up from below. Kirby laid Kay Devereaux by the pool formed by the spring and investigated the updraft. It was strong, steady warm current that could have only one source, Kirby thought; some volcanic furnace deep in the earth, the heat rising eternally through fissures in the mountain rock.

Kirby explored further and found a cave, its mouth partially hidden by a bank of roses. There were supplies inside. He debated making a meal and awakening Kay Devereaux, but thought better of it. Let her sleep. In fact, he was ready for sleep himself.

But not until he'd had a bath. He went back to the pool and stripped and went down into the warm, crystal waters and it was as close to heaven as he ever expected to get. While he laved in the pool and refreshed himself, Kay Devereaux slept on beside the spring. He could see her pale, strained face. She'd taken a real beating, he thought. But a little time in this place would bring her color back.

This place. Kirby stood in the water and looked around. There was something strange about it; something sensually exhilarating. Perhaps the contrast with what they'd been through. Anyhow, it made his whole body tingled with a

fierce, passionate joy of living.

After a while, he got out of the water and lay down, dripping, on the sand beside the pool.

The sound of splashing water awakened him. He opened his eyes and saw Kay Devereaux rise up out of the pool and push back her streaming hair. She laughed softly and Kirby's heart skipped a beat at her beauty. She came out of the water, stood on the pool's edge for a moment like a vibrant, living bow before she plunged back in. When she came up the second time, she turned her eyes on him and asked, "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it wonderful here?"

He could not take his eyes from her. He remembered something she'd said: *It is not by chance that we have been thrown together.* No? Then by whose design? And for what purpose? *We are temptation for each other and perhaps we shall fall.* Had Kay said that? He was not sure. He himself, perhaps. His own heart; his own sense of destiny.

Kay Devereaux had been regarding him quietly. Now she came forward. Lithe, quick steps and she was beside him. Her legs folded beneath her and her hand caressed his face. "Matt—Matt!" Her voice was husky.

And he didn't care. He no longer cared for anything but this girl. Hell or heaven. Agony or joy. Reward or retribution. They were all one to him. He cared only for this girl.

She was in his arms, whispering close to his face in wild passion. "Oh, darling! Darling! No more of this torture! We'll go back! There will be you and me and the whole world to roam and to love in. That's all that matters. Nothing else is important. We'll go back!"

Her kiss was hot and hungry on his lips, but she had made a mistake. He stiffened and turned his face away. If she had come to him in strength, with a strength that had even begun to match his own, no power on earth could have kept him from taking her.

But she led from weakness. She suggested going back. Thus, in a sense, she tried to snatch from him the only thing he had. The fight he had made; the fight that had almost killed both of them. She sought to cancel this out in three words: *We'll go back.* She had tried to turn his sense

of triumph into a feeling of defeated frustration and for Kirby, the magic of the place was gone; the magnet of her body had vanished.

He pushed her away. "There's food inside. I'll get it ready."

"Matt — Matt! Please. I don't want to go any farther. I want to go back!"

"After coming this far? You're mad!"

"I was mad to come!"

"There's a hundred thousand bucks waiting for me. I'm going up there to get it. You're coming with me."

"That isn't necessary. I'll give you a hundred thousand. More than that! I have money. And Matt—don't I mean anything to you at all?"

"So damn much that if you don't get your clothes on I'll sit on you and put them on you myself." He got up and strode into the cave. When he looked out a few minutes later, she was dressed and was combing her shining black hair. He saw that she had been crying.

When they were again ready to move up the mountain, Kirby asked, "How much further is it?"

"Not far. Perhaps four hours." She spoke quietly, almost with listlessness. They rounded a rock buttress, plunged out into the snow, and it was as though the Spa had not existed.

Their arrival was as abrupt as had been their arrival at the Spa. One moment they were fighting the white fury of the mountains. The next moment, they had stepped into a warm, dry, high-vaulted cave.

Kirby had been carrying Kay Devereaux for the last hour. He set her down and noted, in passing, the change that had come over her. Her face was radiant, her eyes shining with an inner light he had never seen before. He said, "Let's take a short rest before we move on."

"We go no further. This is our goal—at last."

He stared in sheer unbelief. "You're crazy. This is nothing but a—"

"This is—well, you might call it the Holy of Holies." There was an absolute reverence in her voice; a whispering of awe that held his mind on balance for a moment. Kay laid a hand on his arm. "I owe you my life—more than that—my soul. You brought me through. I'm more grateful than I can ever say."

"But this is nothing but an empty cave."

"It is the meeting place of the Great Ones. Can't you feel

it? Can't you feel the power singing around you?"

"I feel light-headed if that's what you mean. Who wouldn't in this thin air? I—"

He stopped. A man had entered the cave. He was tall, well over six feet. He wore a plain white robe and when he said, "Ah, I see you two have arrived," he spoke as casually as though they'd but come across the street for a casual conversation.

And now, Kirby felt that of which Kay Devereaux had spoken. The power. It was more than light-headedness. That he knew: a singing, exhilarating vibrancy that whipped through every part of his being. But he wondered whether it came from the place itself or from the man standing before him.

The man certainly threw out an aura of power. Yet his manner was quiet and unassuming. He took Kay Devereaux's hand and said, "You will want to rest." Kay's eyes were upon his, and Kirby noted with more than curiosity that the girl was mute with awe.

Kirby turned his attention to the man. What did he have that set Kay Devereaux trembling? The man regarded Kirby with quiet friendliness. "And you, sir? Are you tired?"

"I never felt better in my life."

The man laughed softly. "The place has that effect." He held forth his hand. "My name here, is Tyrone. Elsewhere I have another name, but that's not important. You, of course, are Mather Kirby."

Kirby nodded.

"Come with me." They left the cave and moved into a somewhat larger one. This was partially furnished with plain, sturdy chairs and tables. Corridors gave off in several directions, and from one of these came a tall, yellow-haired woman whom Kirby immediately judged to be a Swede or a Norwegian—definitely a Nordic type. She came forward and Tyrone said, "Tanya, will you show Miss Devereaux where she is to stay? And perhaps give her something to eat?"

Tanya smiled, "Oh, they've come. You must be tired, my dear." And she took Kay Devereaux's arm and led her away.

"Let me show you around, Kirby," Tyrone said, "That is, if you feel up to it?"

"Of course."

The place was vast—a series of interlocking caves in the solid rock of the mountain. There were plainly furnished

living quarters, dining rooms, all manner of accommodations, and Kirby was bothered by the fact that he could not tell whether the huge maze was of natural formation or had been created by human hands.

As they walked, Tyrone kept up a casual, pleasant conversation, and Kirby got the impression he was deliberately keeping his observations light and inconsequential.

It seemed to Kirby that they had been moving gradually higher, and now they came out onto a sort of gallery—a stone promontory, the forward edge of which was a sheer drop of thousands of feet into chasms below; a platform below which the whole white mountain range was laid out in a panorama of indescribable glory.

Kirby caught his breath and Tyrone said, "Yes, it does have quite an impact upon the eye, doesn't it?"

"I never saw anything like it."

"I come here often." A soft laugh. "Mainly when I begin getting an exaggerated idea of my own importance." As Kirby continued to drink in the scene, Tyrone said, "This series of caverns is thousands of years old. No one knows who discovered it originally. The heat comes from volcanic action deep under the mountains—an eternal furnace." Still Kirby could find no words, and Tyrone said, "Not much like the tropical valley you've been led to expect, is it?"

Kirby turned quick eyes, but before he could speak, Tyrone said, "Let's go back now. You must certainly be hungry and there is no better place to talk than over a table."

As they moved through the caves and corridors, they had come upon others clad in the same kind of white robe as Tyrone. Some smiled and spoke, some did not; all appeared to be going about their personal affairs in this fantastic place, this cave balmy summer air and strange electric power.

The food was good. A bowl of fruit, some sort of excellently cooked vegetables, and a pot of steaming coffee. When Kirby got to the coffee, Tyrone leaned back in his chair and said, "I think you are entitled to know more about this place to which you have come. Why not ask some of the questions that must be roiling around in your mind?"

"I'd like to. First, what kind of a place is this?"

Tyrone considered. "You might call it a club for want

of a better word. Perhaps a recreation center if I may be allowed to stretch the word *recreation*. It is a place where the members of our group come for meditation, consultation, and—you might say—for prayer."

"Your group?"

"We are an organization, in a sense—and don't think I'm being purposely vague. It's just that there aren't any other groups I can think of with which to make comparison. Let me put it that we are a very loose organization with no rules other than that of the individual seeking ever higher personal refinement and development; seeking rapport with the Supreme."

"That doesn't tell me much, I'm afraid."

"I suppose not, but to clarify, you will have to take certain statements I make at their face value. Let us say—neither believing nor disbelieving, but rather laying temporarily aside for future verification or otherwise."

"That's reasonable."

"Very well. There are quite a sizable number of persons in this world, Kirby, who have achieved a great deal of control over themselves, both mentally and physically. And they have learned, through this control basically, to do what might be termed remarkable things."

"Such as—"

"Well, the only path to this retreat is the one you and Miss Devereaux took. It is fraught with great danger and hardship. We all used it once in our lifetimes, but now we come and go as we please. Many of us can transport ourselves through another dimension—instantly from one place to another—by use of natural laws but in a manner known to few. Some of the initiates are able to walk through solid rock."

Kirby said, "Ill set those things aside for—as you say—future verification or otherwise."

Tyrone laughed. "You sure would be smart to do so. I mentioned them only in order to give your mind something tangible to grasp. Because most of it is in the realm of the abstract, so to speak."

"In order to speed things up, I'll grant you are a group of people who can do these remarkable things. What I want to know, is why? Is it just the personal satisfaction you get individually?"

"You have a remarkably agile mind," Tyrone said, "and the answer brings us to the nub of things—the part

that will be hardest to grasp. In a word, *we serve*. We serve as best we can, because to serve is the ultimate destiny of all men and the role in which there is the greatest personal joy.

"The pathway, Kirby, is easy to find, but difficult to follow. Your climb up the mountains is symbolical of that. And to serve, is a privilege, an honor that is not lightly given. It must be earned as is any other privilege. And to serve valuably, a man must first conquer himself."

Kirby smiled. "A little like boot training in the army?"

"A good comparison. As an example, let us use Miss Devereaux."

"A good idea."

"She came from a very wealthy family. There was never any great restraint put upon her. From what I know of the girl, she was never particularly moral because she had few restraints put upon her. She is by nature, a passionate girl, wild and reckless, as you probably recall."

"I had occasion to know."

"Yet there was something within her—let us say she had reached a stage of development when the passion of her spirit transcended that of the flesh and she knew there was a life far more satisfying, more fulfilling that her soul yearned for." Tyrone paused and glanced at Kirby. "I'm trying to keep this from sounding Sunday-schoolish, and I don't want to sound like a revivalist because religion does not necessarily enter into it aside from the fact that in all nature every yearning to improve and develop is religion, from the urge of the seed to sprout, right up to the need of a human being to fulfil himself."

"I'm following you."

"Good. So Miss Devereaux came to the attention of one of our group. You may think that coincidental, but we have a saying: 'When the pupil is ready, he will find the teacher waiting,' and you'd be surprised how often it works out that way. We never question the wisdom behind these things."

Kirby nodded. "And this appealed to her?"

"Very much. But it was not as simple as that. Certain weaknesses of the flesh and spirit have to be faced by an aspirant in order to discover the truth—whether he really wants to come or whether it is a passing fancy. The road you two took up from the plains is admirably suited for such a testing as you both encountered."

"Miss Devereaux wanted to go back."

"At the Spa?"

"Yes."

"Did you also wish to return?"

"No."

"Then you are exceptional. The Spa might be called the last battle-ground. Once past it, the worst is over."

"What is Kay Devereaux's program from here out?"

"It wouldn't sound very attractive to one not ready for it. A long, long period of disciplinary training. There are certain techniques used—methods of self-development handed down through the ages. She will have assistance—guidance—but in reality she will be all alone because refinement and self-discipline come only through the intense effort of the individual."

"How long will it take her?"

Tyrone shrugged. "Possibly in five years—after that period in one of our refuges, she may be ready to go back to her own world, but as an initiate, she will only have begun." Tyrone leaned closer across the table. "I came up that blizzard-torn path you just navigated exactly sixty years ago."

Kirby blinked. "You aren't sixty years old *yet!*"

Tyrone smiled. "Far older than that. I would not burden your credulity with my true age. And I still have far to go."

Kirby was scowling at the fruit in the bowl. "You say you serve. In just what manner?"

"That's a little hard to explain. I would say, each in his own way, but that would hardly answer anything for you, so let me say this: We are a force for good, in a world laboriously seeking its salvation. We move in what you would probably call high places. More often than not the advice and counsel of a member of the Brotherhood has altered a decision in high places that was the difference between peace and war. Even now, an age of understanding is dawning among nations that was originally nurtured only in our hearts.

"We go everywhere and do what we can. We *are* everywhere, not keeping to ourselves, but going among the people because we *are* the people."

Kirby regarded the white-robed man keenly. "One of your kind might be a barber for instance?"

"That's possible."

"A barber named Tony Caruso?"

"I might say, even probable."

"A man with a turban in a customs office? A man with a black derby in India. A bag of skin and bones sitting in front of a hut in an Indian plains village?"

Kirby stopped to breathe. Tyrone smiled. "Any or all of these," he murmured.

They sat in silence for a long time, then Kirby said, "How do I fit into this?"

"Perhaps you don't. It's all up to you. A certain barber you mentioned thought he saw a need within you that you yourself did not see. For that reason you were told nothing. But your coming was such that you can leave if you wish, taking with you a sense of pride and accomplishment in having helped Kay Devereaux up the first step of her search for perfection. Her gratitude will go with you."

While Kirby was silent, Tyrone added, "You can take added pride in the fact that even while you helped her, you had it in your power to kill forever her chances. When her temptation became too great to resist, you held solid when no man could have blamed you for doing otherwise. You have strength given to few, Kirby. You are an exceptional man."

"It wasn't as you seem to think at all," Kirby said. "I had another reason—" He caught himself and relaxed. "I'll stay around a while if you'll let me."

"We'll be delighted."

"By the way. Have you any kind of a library here? I didn't see one and sometimes I like to read myself to sleep at night."

"Of course. Come. I'll show it to you."

Kirby pointed. "That one—with the black and white binding. Skin isn't it?"

Tyrone took the book from its shelf. "Goat skin. A very old volume. No one knows how old." He handed the book to Kirby.

The latter opened it to find stiff parchment pages inscribed in various hands of writing—with various inks—and in many languages. He said, "Some of these writings are very old—some quite fresh."

"Yes. Many different people have written in it. The book has no special significance except that through the centuries, it has become rather of an honor to put a hand to it."

"These languages—"

"Every tongue from ancient Egyptian to your modern English it represented."

Kirby thumbed through the pages. "Look—look at this!"

Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought—

Tyrone's soft laugh touched Kirby's ears. Tyrone said, "Not written by the author. To the best of our knowledge Lincoln never visited here. But concerning those excerpts from your Constitution—we are not sure."

Kirby turned the page and read:

We hold these truths to be self evident—

"But those writings are comparatively fresh. This place is very old and has been visited by many people. Those who purport to be experts have classified the handwriting of the fiery Mohammed in that volume. Buddha is said to be represented."

Kirby turned the ancient pages.

"Also, there are unrecorded years in the life of the gentle Nazarene during which, it is said, He climbed the mountains and came to us and left His blessing in that book."

"It can't be true!" Kirby muttered.

"Perhaps not, but there are certain collectors beyond our mountains who would exchange all they have for our humble little goat-skin book."

Tyrone's mood took on briskness as he lifted the volume from Kirby's still fingers and returned it to its place. "But none of that is important at the moment. It's time for you to get some rest. I'll show you to your quarters."

"I'd—I'd rather stay here a while and browse if you don't mind—"

"Not at all. When you're ready, I'll be around." And Tyrone walked from the library.

A little of the singing power left with him, Kirby thought, but he gave that only a moment. His mind was occupied with his own affairs. Speed, he thought, was the answer. They would hardly expect him to leave immediately. They would certainly be off their guard if he took the book, went back to the entrance, where his furs were waiting, and—vanished.

Resolutely, he took the book from its place and slipped it under his jacket. He left the library and moved down the corridor. On the way to the entrance he passed only one person—a woman who gave the impression of age, but with an unlined face and the clear eyes of youth. She passed without glancing at Kirby.

He went on his way and no one interfered as he donned his furs. He took a deep breath and pushed out into the

mountain snows. The gorge was still as he began his descent, but a flash blizzard hit about halfway down. He clung to the wall, gasping as he adjusted himself to the maelstrom. Then he pushed on . . .

He stumbled out of the gorge and fell, blinded, into the sanctuary of the Spa. He'd made it! He'd done the job he'd come to do. They could have their cave and their pious illusions as to what was good for everybody. He had a hundred thousand dollars and a little trip down the mountain and that was all; all that stood between him and a soft life. He shook the snow from his eyes and looked around.

He was not alone.

He got slowly to his feet and saw the four, dark-skinned natives. They had removed their furs and appeared to be enjoying themselves. Their leader grinned: the jeep driver who had given Kirby his final instructions.

Kirby said, "I thought I was to leave the book. You said the money would be waiting."

"The money is waiting, chum. Just a little change in plans. We got orders to meet you and take the book personally. That way, nothing can go wrong."

"Let's see the money."

The native took a packet from his coat. "There it is, chum. Every dollar. In fact, a bonus. There's a hundred grand there, so the first five grand you got is gravy."

Kirby took the money. Slowly, he handed over the book. The native's eyes glistened and there was something else, Kirby caught: a look and an attitude of awe, almost of reverence, among the others as their eyes fell upon the book.

The native fell back and took a gun from his pocket. Kirby tensed. "What the—?"

"Don't get excited. This is just a precaution. In case you change your mind. We're going back down, now. I suggest you come along. It's a lot easier on the rope."

The others had already gone about donning their furs and laying out the rope that would bind them together on the return journey. The leader was examining the book. His eternal grin flashed. "You were a fool, Kirby. A sucker, man."

"A fool?"

"Sure. A lousy hundred grand for this book? It's priceless. You could have got half a million. You sold out cheap."

A sudden chill went through Kirby. Those words—*you sold out cheap,* bit down into his

mind like drenching vitriol. There had been something hiding in there all the time: a bomb—and the words were like a fuse that set it off.

He advanced on the native. "Give me that book!"

The gun came up. "Now wait a minute, chum. It's all over. You made a deal and you're stuck with it—"

"Give me that book!"

The other natives backed warily away, toward the downside exit from the Spa. The leader took two backward steps in the face of Kirby's advance. "That's it, chum. I don't want to kill you, so why don't you quiet down and hook onto the rope?"

"Give me that book!"

Kirby lunged and got his hands on the native when the gun went off. He felt no pain, only numbness. He fought savagely for the weapon, turned it away and wrenched it from the man's hand. He staggered back a pace, the gun in one hand, the book in the other. "Now get going. I'll give you ten seconds to get out on that trail. If you aren't gone then, I'll kill you."

The leader was not a brave man. There was a pallor under his dark skin as he backed away behind a placating gesture. "Sure—sure, chum. Take it easy with that rod. We're on our way."

Kirby thought they gave in rather easily. He would have changed his mind, could he have seen the doom shining from his own eyes; the sudden twist of madness in his face . . .

They were gone and he stood swaying; with a widening patch of red on the breast of his coat. He looked down at the dark saturation and turned slowly. He put the book inside his coat, threw the gun away and pushed into the blizzard on the uptrail . . .

He remembered none of the trip until he fell across the threshold of the entrance cave. The warm air hit him, telling the trip was over, and he dimly saw Tyrone standing over him; reaching down to help him.

"Don't touch me," Kirby snarled. "Leave me alone."

Tyrone drew back, and Kirby struggled to his feet. Tyrone said, "You've been shot. You need help," but Kirby snarled again and staggered up the corridor, with the white-robed figure hovering in his wake.

To the library, where Kirby reeled across to the shelf and took the goat-skin book from inside his coat. He shoved it into its niche, then turned on

the other and said, "It's back. I took it out, but I brought it —back—again—all—" and he slumped down in a dead faint . . .

Kirby opened his eyes. He was on a cot in a quiet, high-ceilinged cave. There was no pain in his chest. Tyrone was looking down at him, smiling. "I'm glad you decided to come back," he said.

Kirby regarded him for a moment in silence. "You knew I was going to steal that book, didn't you?"

"I suspected it."

"You could have stopped me."

"I suppose so."

"Then why didn't you?"

"It would be unpardonable to interfere with a man wrestling his own demon. Only the tormented one can win a fight of that kind. No one can help him in the midst of his battle. You will remember that Jesus went alone to the olive grove."

Kirby closed his eyes wearily. "But the book is so valuable."

"It had no value at all when compared to Mather Kirby. It was only paper and hide. Mather Kirby is made of something more valuable."

"What—what would have happened to the book if they'd got their hands on it?"

"It would eventually have found its way back here. Twice before it has been stolen through the centuries. Both times it came back."

Kirby stared bleakly at the ceiling. "How low a man can fall!" he said.

"But there is an opposite: How high a man can rise!"

"You never see the black side, do you?"

"It's very bad practice. You get some rest now. You've come a rough, rock road and you're weary. We'll talk later . . ."

Kirby and Kay Devereaux stood, white-robed, on the promontory, looking out over the mountain range. "Did you ever see anything quite so beautiful?" Kay asked. "It—it sort of sets a goal toward which a man can strive."

She turned and looked at him and put her hand in his. "I haven't had a chance to thank you for what you did. Without you I'd never have made it."

He returned her look. "You would have made it—one way or another—so the gratitude is mine. Without you I'd never have known this world existed."

"I was in love with you. You knew that didn't you? I still am."

"I wanted you more than

any woman I ever knew," he said, simply.

"I hoped you did. It's something we can use for a stepping stone to the greater love."

"Where will you go?"

"They say I'm to be taken to a retreat in Switzerland. For five years. Then—"

"Boot camp," Kirby said, smiling. "Discipline. That's what we need. How did Tyrone put it? No man can be free until he conquers himself."

"But when he does—" Her beautiful eyes shone as they looked out across the mountains. "Where will you go?"

"To the Andes. They have a place there in South America."

Her mind had turned to something else. "Do you think it's really true—that some of the Brotherhood can work miracles? Walk on water? Bend natural laws to their will?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling it isn't very important. The important thing is to realize there is no limit to how far a person can go if he starts to climb." He looked at her quickly. "We got this far, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll go further."

"Each of us in our own paths."

"Each of us in our own paths—"

"I'll be lonely."

"But not for long." He took her in his arms, very tenderly and kissed her.

Then she turned and walked back into the cave.

But he stood there for a long time, looking out over the mountains.

THE END

"He was late for our wedding, too."

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Gentlemen:

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HOUSE OF TOYS

By KARL STANLEY

Harry was just an ordinary run-of-the-mill guy. No great ambitions. All he wanted to do was sell a few toys and make a few kids happy. Then along came this other quiet little guy and said, "Look, chum, let's make a whole planet happy."

HE WAS a small cheerful man in a neat blue suit. For the past hour he had been wandering about the premises of the House of Toys on East 53rd St. There seemed no order or reason to his movements. He skipped from one section to another as if it were all one grand playground to which he had just been admitted. To the salespeople he was a 'looker' not a 'buyer', for although several of them had approached him, each had received the stock answer: "Oh, I'm just looking, if it's all right . . .?"

At the moment he was in the section devoted to active play equipment.

That was where Albert Bengart, the owner of the House of Toys, first saw him. Bengart rarely interested himself in the retail end of the business. He was content to let Harry Sperbro, floor manager, take complete charge there. But Harry was not allowed to handle school business. And the little man was in the section to which retail customers seldom came. Bengart strolled over to where Ella Funston, the company's school counsellor, was typing her reports. Besides being the school counsellor she was also floor supervisor, and Harry Sperbro's immediate superior.

"Anyone taking care of the

customer in the play area?" Bengart asked.

Ella looked up from the typewriter, adjusted her glasses for better vision, and turned her glance to follow Bengart's. "I don't know, but I'm sure someone approached him. Why?"

"I don't know of anyone having approached him in the past half hour. Don't you think you should?"

"I thought we'd gone quite thoroughly into the business of my taking retail customers when we had the last sales meeting. You set a hard and fast rule that I am *not* to go on the floor unless I am called by the retail sales help, and only if it has to do with play group or school business. Are we discontinuing that policy as of now?"

"No-no. But it seems to me there should be more flexibility on the part of individual members of the organization. We're simply not set up for a unit type of sale where each person is responsible solely for a particular area or situation."

"I know. That was your thought before the meeting. Until the day I was taken up by a retail sale while Mr. Ford of Allen-Hill Recreation Group cooled his heels for a half hour waiting for me. Mrs. Rosecrans of the Child Playschool Association will be here at two. It is now twenty minutes of. I haven't had lunch yet. Do you want me to take care of the gentleman first and then ask Mrs. Rosecrans to excuse me while I go to lunch?"

Bengart said nothing. But he continued to stare with almost malevolent intent at the little man, who at the moment was feeling the wooden hand grips on a climbing rope.

Ella Funston began to put her desk in order. "On my way out I'll tell Harry to see what he wants."

Harry Sperbro was building a mannikin from pieces of a set of Plastishapes. He had noticed the one he had made several days ago was missing from the top of the construction toy counter. Little devils, he thought, smiling to himself. They'd steal the joint clean if they had a chance. He added a base to the figure and started for the counter.

"Harry," Miss Funston stopped him.

Harry put the figure down and gave her his attention.

Miss Funston said: "Anyone talked to the little man in the active play section? Mr. Bengart seems to think not."

Sperbro's eyes dulled with

repressed anger. "Oh! Why doesn't Bengart stay in his office? Things'd run so much smoother."

"The point is he doesn't," Ella Funston said. "So you'd better go over to see what the man wants."

"I'm sure both Alice and Ted approached him when he came in."

"I don't doubt it, but your boss has the heaves about it now. Thinks we'll have to close up if we don't see this customer."

"Okay! Suppose he's a director or with some P. T. A.?"

Her voice had a malicious edge: "Let Mr. Bengart handle him, then. He's always telling us we're not down-to-business with school people. Too fussy about programming for children. Too much ethics and not enough sales talk. Matter-of-fact I hope the little man *is* from some school or other."

"Our friend is over in the book section now," Harry observed. "I'll get to him in a second."

The little man was turning the leaves of *Pretzel.* He seemed interested in the illustrations of the dachshund. Harry thought it a proper moment to approach him.

"A very popular book with the four-year olds," Harry said.

"Really?" the little man said. He closed the book, placed it back on the rack.

". . . If the child is a bit older, the Milne books are excellent." Harry continued.

The little man twitched his lips in a quick smile. "I am not interested in books, but I find the rest of the store fascinating. Utterly! I must admit I've never seen anything like it."

"Well, we're not the only ones in the educational toy field," Harry said.

"I suppose not."

"I think we're the only ones who handle educational toys exclusively, however. No guns here. Or the kind of stuff shown on TV."

"Guns . . . for children?"

"Every kid's a Davy Crockett today. A fur piece and a gun. You'd think he was the only pioneer in history. But they're cashing in on it."

"You don't approve?" the little man asked.

"What's that got to do with it?" Harry demanded. "Leave it to the toy gun people and they'd have a toy pistol in the hands of every child from five months to fifteen years. I can picture the ads, all right. Diapered baby with toy .45 in his hand. And the legend:

"Don't give baby just *any* rattle. Our .45 model toy automatics have the new 'chubby-hand' grip for infants. The trigger and guard have been set back, too, just right for baby's pinkies."

"This disturbs you?" the little man asked.

Now that's a hell of a question Harry thought. What does this little character take me for? A moron? He must be stupid, or something. He gave the little man a shrewd searching glance. No, too much intelligence in that tight-skinned face, too much awareness in the eyes.

Harry caught an indefinable something about the man before him that made him hold back the sharp retort he was about to make. "Let me say this," Harry said slowly. "There comes a time for most kids when they want a gun. All sorts of reasons for it. Associations, TV, movies, books they read, or even something like wanting what the kid next door may have. But I don't think it should be the only toy."

Suddenly Harry was aware that he had been delivering a lecture. And all he had wanted was to find out what the man wanted.

"You like children, don't you?" the little man asked.

"Let's say I understand them."

"A valid point. We all like children. I have in mind purchasing something for a group of children. Perhaps you can assist me?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't handle school trade. If you'll excuse me I'll have someone take care of you."

"No, don't go away. You can always call this other person. Now, I want to set up a program for a rather large group of children. Where would we start?"

"Are they of mixed ages?"

"Yes."

"Are they nursery age, preschool . . ?"

"None of these children have had experience with educational toys, if that will help."

"Might as well start with manipulation and coordination toys, then," Harry led the way to the first section on their tour.

It was a half hour later, as they entered the play equipment area, that Harry became aware of how much he had been giving of his knowledge. It came as a surprise to him that he had learned and absorbed so much of the business. He was conscious, too,

that he spoke of these children's tools of learning with a mixture of respect and affection. And Harry was rather pleased at the attention his companion had given him.

But now, in the active play area, Harry knew someone else would have to take over. Here he was at a loss. He thought Ella Funston would have been the right person for the little man, but she was already busy with Mrs. Rosecrans. Reluctantly, he asked to be excused to get Bengart.

"This is Mr. Bengart," Harry said, "the designer and creator of all that I've shown you, sir. His knowledge of active play equipment is much beyond mine. Mr. Bengart, this is Mr. . . ."

"Smith, James Smith."

"A not uncommon name," Bengart said. But his heartiness was dampened by the little man's silence and steady gaze.

"I changed it from the unpronounceable one I had. Not an uncommon thing, I understand."

"Not at all. Not at all. Sensible from a purely business point of view. Particularly when you are dealing with parents and children. Harry, I think you can go back to the floor now. I'll take over here."

"I would like Harry to stay," the little man said. "He has helped considerably and given me much good advice. Harry, I hope your wife appreciates you?"

"Never found time to get married, sir. Besides, the end results of marriage are children. And the Lord knows I have enough to do with them in this place."

"How do you feel about children, Mr. Bengart?"

"Frankly, I guess my interest would be called technical. Until I came on the scene, play equipment lacked function, was not made for easy storage. Now a school's play area need be only a third of what it once was, and equipment costs have been halved. That is the picture I can draw best for a director."

"You think in terms of school needs rather than children's, is that it, Mr. Bengart?"

"I'd say a school's needs *are* the children's needs. Let's look at it this way. Some kids are happy with a ten-cent toy. Others play stick ball with a broken broom handle. You could equip a school in those terms if you wanted to. But the modern thought is to use functional, well-thought-out designs to please both parents and children; and still keep

your profits on a high-percentage level."

"I see. Well, I will say I like what I have seen here . . ."

"You mean you're just looking?" Bengart asked.

"It isn't allowed?"

"Certainly. But I must say that you won't find anything better in design or price, no matter where you go."

The little man smiled, patted Harry's arm, and said, "In that case you will hear from me, tomorrow. Thank you for your trouble, Harry. Goodbye."

Bengart waited until the other was out of earshot before turning on Harry Sperbro. "Damn it! How many times have I told you that I don't want you or any of the retail help waiting on school trade? You must have said something to him, or perhaps not said the things he wanted to hear. With business as bad as it is we can't afford to let a single customer walk. Especially quantity sales. I wish to God I could teach you people to do things the way they should be done!"

Harry's lips thinned "Right off the bat I wanted to turn him over to you, but he turned thumbs down on it."

"So you used your own judgment. I don't want you or anyone else in this place to use judgment. That's my job, and mine alone. You turn them over from now on, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "But I've got an idea we'll hear from Mr. Smith tomorrow."

Harry was right. It was shortly after eleven the next morning that Mr. Smith phoned. He spoke to Bengart at some length. At the end of the conversation Bengart called Harry into his office.

"Your Mr. Smith will be here soon and we're going to go out to his place in Jersey. He made it a point that I bring you along. Said he felt very much at ease with you and that he would appreciate it greatly if I allowed you to come. Heaven knows why. I think I am more than capable of answering his questions. Especially on product analysis. Some of these school directors . . ."

"I could be busy when he comes," Harry said pointedly.

"H'mm. Better not. I have the feeling this could be a good sale if we play it right. I'll ask Miss Funston to take charge of the floor while you're gone."

Very shortly afterward, Smith made his appearance. They took a cab to Bengart's

garage and were soon on their way to Englewood, New Jersey, near which city Smith said his place was. The last part of the trip was over a gravelled road that sent up a choking cloud of dust.

Bengart had attempted to make conversation all through the ride but Smith opened his mouth only to give directions. Harry could feel the anger building up in Bengart, and knew it was only a matter of time before he would give vent to it. Smith's place proved to be the final straw. It looked like a Colonial-type barn to Harry, one moreover, that had been allowed to retain its old-time weather-beaten look. It certainly didn't look like the sort of place parents would want to send their children.

Smith was first out of the car. He moved with almost jaunty steps to the single door on that side of the building facing them. "We're here gentlemen. Won't you come in?"

Bengart looked as if he were having a stroke. His face was ashen, his hands shaking. Harry recognized the condition for what it was, Bengart's show of violent anger. But Smith seemed unaware of it.

"Well, do come in!" he said. It was more of a command than a request.

"In? In where, this barn? Is this the place you are intending as a school?" Bengart shouted. "I have never been so insulted in all my life! How dare you . . ."

"Take it easy, Mr. Bengart," Harry cautioned. "Perhaps he's got the inside fixed up."

Bengart turned on Harry. His face was livid now. "Who cares what it looks like inside? The outside would be enough to frighten the most progressive parent in the world."

Smith had opened the door while Bengart raged. He motioned Harry with a beckoning forefinger. Harry left Bengart's side and joined Smith and looked into the interior of the barn-like place.

"Mr. Bengart," he turned to call his employer. "I think maybe you'd better take a look at this place."

Bengart joined the others, though with an obvious show of reluctance. One look at the interior, however, drove the thunderclouds from his face. He had never seen a more modern interior.

"Don't be misled by exteriors," Mr. Smith said. "Please come in."

He closed the door behind

them then led the way through the large room the door opened onto and to a circular staircase along one wall. They went up the staircase to what seemed a second floor level and into a room that was an office of some kind. Smith gestured toward a couple of curved metal chairs. "Be seated gentlemen, please." He waited for them to become comfortable. "And now to business."

Bengart said, "I must admit I was somewhat disappointed when I first saw your place."

"We didn't want to change the exterior," Mr. Smith explained. "Of course the interior was another thing."

"I like it very much. Yes, very much. But as you said, to business. Now, how many children did you intend to program over a year?"

"I don't know exactly. That's why I asked Harry to be present. I think Harry will understand the children I am taking him to see. Oh, he may not see all of them. But he won't have to. They all have the same problems. They have never known toys, as such. We feel that all these years we have been wrong in the raising of these youngsters. Only we didn't know what to do about it. Not until we discovered there was another place where there were children. And that you had learned what to do about it. Of course there was a problem. We couldn't very well transport a whole educational system. But if we could find a single person who might have enough knowledge of toys, and understand children's need of toys . . . I think you'll like it where you're going, Harry."

Harry gaped.

"And you, also, Bengart. Your services will be needed, too. Your designs pleased me greatly."

Bengart had been sitting with dull eyes and slack jaw while Mr. Smith spoke. Now he roused. "I think we'd better get out of here, Harry," he said. "I knew there was something wrong with this man. Moment I saw him. And when we get back I'll . . ."

"Do sit down Mr. Bengart, and make yourself comfortable. We have a very long trip before us. No need to get upset. You will become quite used to your new home."

"New home . . . ?"

"Yes."

But Harry knew what Mr. Smith meant. He had looked out of one of the windows. The black of outer space met his eyes.

And, somehow, Harry was pleased to see it. . . . **THE END**

ACCORDING TO YOU...

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

I've read complaints about price, size, science versus fiction or comic books, weak or rotten stories. Before mags are extinct, I'd like 2¢ worth.

Price? What's 35¢ if you are being entertained?

Size? Don't care if it fits my purse or if I have to carry it home in my son's wagon. As I read English only, the words science-fiction on your cover means *both*. Also Richard is so right. The comic book is the public's favorite reading matter. Thank God I am one of the public who can still laugh.

Stories? Here is my first complaint. Your Dec. issue finally cut the cake. No taste, no texture, no icing. If a book can be put down while reading any story in it, the conclusion is "Somebody Goofed."

Having derived so much pleasure from your mag in the past, I hope to again be satisfied in the future.

Mrs. C. H. Deller
5540 Lonna Linda
Long Beach, Calif.

• *It sounds like a novel idea: caring only about the* stories *in a magazine. Frankly, if this viewpoint catches on, we see nothing ahead but chaos. Here we spend a lot of time figuring out exactly what should go into the illustrations, into the editorial; what price to charge, should we experiment with a different size, etc. If it should turn out that all this kind of*

activity isn't really important, we'd have to fire three-quarters of our editorial staff . . . On second thought, we won't even print *your letter, Mrs. Deller.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I would like to say at the start that, although I read S-F stories all the time, this is the first letter I have ever written to one.

I have been looking over some copies of your magazines (Amazing Stories and Fantastic SF) and of the two I can say that I like the first one best. I have read most of the stories in these magazines and have found that in some of them I like the letter department best. I am for it 100%. There are a couple of things I would like explained about this department. First is, when you said in the December '54 Fantastic SF that "If it takes five pages or ten, your letters will be published," did you mean any and all letters? The second thing is, just what is a "missile" type letter?

I have only one gripe with your mag, and with many others. It is, why don't the cover pictures on most magazines jive with the cover story? In most cases the picture has little if any connection to the story. It makes me ferocious to see a mag that has a cover picture which seems interesting and upon inspection find the picture has no connection with the story.

Phillip Brooks
806 N. Marion
Tulsa, Okla.

• *Length of letters do not determine whether they will be used in the magazine. Subject matter comes first: controversial pieces are given preference (incidentally, calling the editor names and telling him how lousy his publication is, does not constitute controversy), and interesting comment comes second . . . A "missile" type of letter is one loaded with high explosives . . . You'll find our covers tie in closely with one of the stories in each issue.*—ED.

Dear Sir:

My subscription to *Fantastic* has indeed expired. Ordinarily I should have let it go at that, but your recent "tickler" to renew has prompted me to reply.

Not only has my subscription expired but I am not only insisting that it *not* be renewed but I'm not even going to bother looking for it on the newsstands either.

As a matter of fact, I think it is a foul policy to turn out the first six issues of a pretty fair magazine (and thus lure a subscription from me) only to backslide into strictly third rate writing and illustrating.

Maybe you do make money putting out the kind of magazine you do now but Browne's insistence that he "is as proud of the first few issues as he is of the ones put out currently" makes me retch. If his statement is sincere, then the fine first few issues were not the result of anything he had to do with them. The kind of person who could create the first issues of *Fantastic* is not the kind of person who could be proud of the present issues; perhaps from a monetary angle but never from an artistic viewpoint.

So nuts to *Fantastic* and Ziff-Davis and may you all be throttled with your own dollar signs. One thing is sure: my own subscription money will never contribute to any "success" you might have in the future.

John W. Downing
1995 Cliffview Rd.
Cleveland, 21, Ohio

● *It seems to me that you have stopped your thinking at the halfway point, sir. There is more than one kind of story form. In the first few issues of the digest-sized Fantastic we published (and were proud of) a certain type of fantasy fiction. Later (see Reader John Riley Brant's letter and our reply) we changed policy to the present type of fiction. We liked action and science-fiction stories and took pride—and still do!—in the kind of story appearing in these pages now. Our value as an editor lies in not being committed inflexibly to any one type of fiction—which explains the apparent ambivalence you complain of.* —ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Just writing to say I think *Fantastic* is one of the best SF mags, and that I dug the December issue the most. I liked "All the Walls were Mist" and "Between Two Worlds" best.

Since everyone's saying they want longer stories, why not

have 4 short stories and a serial per issue instead of 5 short? I personally like a good serial.

One other thing, no matter what others say—I say the letter column should stay, I enjoy it.

Ted Bliss
1727 Schiller Ave.
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

• *We wouldn't dare run serials in* Fantastic *while it's on a bi-monthly schedule . . . The letter column will stay—although a smaller number of pages will be devoted to it.* —ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I picked up my first science-fiction magazine, and it happened to be yours. All I can say is, BRAVO!! It's terrific.

There is a four way tie for my favorite story of the issue. The only one I didn't like was "Are You Hungry?" There were 5 stories.

Can you tell me why the pulp-type magazine switched to digest size?

I would love to see an Amazing Story Annual.

Are there any back issues available and how can I go about getting them?

How about some of Ray Bradbury's stories in your mag?

Leonard Brown
4701 Snyder Ave.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

• *Our own favorite in the issue was—"Are You Hungry?" . . . Pulp-size magazines stopped selling, therefore the change to digest . . . You're going to see an Annual on or about March 10th—price 50¢ . . . We have no back issues available . . . Bradbury is out of our reach.* —ED.

Dear Editor:

I figure it's about time I had my say. I have been reading SF for quite awhile and have always suffered in silence but after reading John Toland's "The Man Who Reads Minds," I can be silent no longer. My favorite stories have always been those about telepaths. I don't know why but something about the subject fascinates me. So, in the best of faith I started

Mr. Toland's story. I must say I was sorely disappointed. I know it's fantasy but even fantasy should have some explanation. All of a sudden on a streetcar, he realizes he can read minds. Now he wasn't born this way and he did nothing to bring it on. This is slightly hard to believe. Then, in the end of the story after he gets the job, his telepathic talents just vanish into clean air with no apparent reason. Now his being able to read minds was no more a fantastic feat that that of the man in "All Walls Were Mist" being able to walk thru walls. The difference lies in the fact that Paul W. Fairman explained in his story how the phenomenon came about. Even the most fantastic fantasy should and could be believable. I don't know if I am making myself clear as I am not too good at this sort of thing, but this is the same complaint I have against so many otherwise great fantasy stories.

Now that I've complained, I would like to hand out some praise. I enjoy your magazine very much and read every issue. Stick to pure fantasy and not science fiction, I love it. Give us another story by Fairman, he is excellent. And last but not least, give us more telepaths, e.s.p.'s and child genuises and I'll promise you at least one very reliable avid fan.

June Morrison
907 N. Edgemont
Los Angeles, Calif.

● *You've got a point there, June. Frankly, we were so caught up in the Toland story that we forgot to wonder* why *his hero was able to read minds. Personally we don't mind stretching our credulity out of shape when enjoying a fantasy story—and we'd certainly prefer no explanation to an attempt by the author to justify the gimmick used by running in a long boring exposition.* —ED.

Dear Mr. Browne and Friends:

Just finished the Dec. issue of *Fantastic* and as usual turned to the letter section for a few laughs, and I mean laughs.

All those wonderful critics, with their gripes and slings, this one wants that, that one wants this and the old ones were better, Bah!

I go back to the real old days of Gernsbach and all those years I have read SF—everyone that has ever been printed.

Whether Fantasy, whether True Science-Fiction—all of them. In that period of time there have been good ones, bad ones, mediocre ones. But they have all given me one thing, hours of enjoyment.

Frankly, I think the December issue was not of the better kind but I enjoyed it. What I want to say is this: In all my years of reading, this is only my third letter because I feel that you folks putting out the mag are trying to do a good job, keep it up, because if your critics could do better they would, so why yelp if you personally don't like a story, and I mean this for those holy Joes that look down on us plebian B.E.M.'s whose tastes differ. Next issue may be one you like and I don't —so to paraphrase—'You can satisfy some of the people some of the time but you can't satisfy all the people all the time'.

So just keep up the good work. I like it, I like it.

Sorry I can't put an address as I travel constantly and am only in a town two or three weeks before I move on.

H. Sachs
St. Louis, Mo.

• *If everyone with a gripe failed to write letters to us, you'd get no laughs from the letters section. So go easy on the poor benighted folk; they deserve to be heard—and believe you us, they will be!*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

The December issue of *Fantastic* was great! You really hit the nail on the head by stating in the October issue that you had a surprise for us readers.

Every story was unusual—especially "All Walls were Mist." —as if the reader was in the story.

Your column, "The Low Man on the Asteroid" was cleverly written. I always enjoy it.

Anyway, getting back to your new idea of *Fantastic* stories, give us more.

W. C. Brandt
Oakland, Calif.

• *Letters expressing satisfaction with the so-called "dream issue" ran seven to one. That's good enough for us to come up with others of the same kind from time to time.* —ED.

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID

(Concluded from page 4)

And something more. There are eight or nine millions of people in New York and yet there are no New Yorkers. There are Iowans and Ohioans and Michiganders and Illinoisans and Idahoans and a couple of guys from Arapahoe, Nebraska, but very few New Yorkers.

Because New York is everyone's and no one's. It is America's city and America comes here to play and fight and starve and grow rich. They come here to gripe about the subways and moan about the busses and howl about how much it costs to live, while all the time they know they are the envied ones in the poverty-stricken, starving world. Billions of unfortunate ones would trade their hope of heaven for a scant week of residence in this dirty, sanitary, licentious, God-fearing, over-fed, starving, crooked, honest, stupid, wise, sad, happy town. Fantastic.

If you've never been to New York you should come sometime. Not for very long, maybe, but you should come and see it because it's your city. You had to do with building it and making it what it is. And who knows? It might get a little lonesome if you don't show up sometime.

And if you come, you'll find many things you don't like. People will shove you around. Cabs will try to rip the seat of your pants off if you don't move briskly. Headwaiters will make you feel like a freak just by looking at you. If you walk through the wrong sections late at night you'll get your head broken and your poke lifted. But you'll enjoy your visit.

Because you have a proprietory interest here. This is your city. The wealth and genius of your nation got married and you went to the wedding and this sprawling city is their first-born and you're the godfather and you'll want to know how the child is doing.

These two had many other children. They are scattered from coast to coast and would take your breath away at their magnificence. But New York City is the first-born and the first-born is always the favored child.

So come and see New York. Your city. You can get here in twelve hours or less from any point in the nation.

And that one fact alone is truly fantastic. —PWF

—Continued from Back Cover

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